

THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE SHADOW WORLD

PART I: THE SINISTER FRATERNITY





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
SHADOW WORLD**

Part I: The Sinister Fraternity

Jupiter, Pete and Bob get a unique chance—they are selected to experience student life at Ruxton University for two weeks. Shortly after moving into the dormitory, it becomes clear that not only lectures, parties and student trouble await them here. They witness strange events on campus—students suddenly become aggressive, animal howls echoing across the grounds, and rumours of a certain ‘Teumessian fox’. Is this the doing of a sinister fraternity? The Three Investigators plan to infiltrate them to get to the bottom of the mystery.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Shadow World
Part I: The Sinister Fraternity

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1. The University and the Fox

“Strange...” Pete Crenshaw propped his elbows on the table top and rested his chin on both hands. “Don’t you think it’s strange?”

Bob Andrews had been typing listlessly on the keyboard for quite a while, surfing the Internet for fun. The hum of the computer ventilation could be heard everywhere in the headquarters of The Three Investigators. “Why are you hanging around doing nothing?”

The Second Investigator sighed. “If you ask me, it’s not just me hanging around, it’s all three of us.”

“Er... you noticed Jupe isn’t here, though?” Bob remarked.

“Ha ha!” Pete went on. “I’m sure he’ll be back in a minute and do exactly the same as you and me—nothing at all.”

Bob couldn’t argue with that. “That’s actually strange, now that I think about it. When was the last time we were bored during the big holidays and not working on some mysterious case?”

The Three Investigators had been waiting all summer holidays for something to happen... anything... otherwise they would expect to remain bored hanging around their headquarters for the rest of the holidays.

The headquarters of The Three Investigators was an old mobile home trailer situated on the premises of The Jones Salvage Yard in Rocky Beach. This salvage yard was owned and operated by the uncle and aunt of the First Investigator, Jupiter Jones.

To protect the trailer from unwanted visitors and the threat of decay, it was hidden under old junk and scrap metal and only accessible through secret passages. The main passage was known as the Cold Gate—a discarded refrigerator that was embedded in the huge pile of junk. Inside the refrigerator, there was a secret mechanism that allowed the back wall to be slid aside. This provided access to a short dark tunnel that led to the door of the trailer.

Over the years, they had developed the trailer into a functioning office with computer, telephone and filing cabinets, and equipped it with all sorts of electronic gadgets. They also have a small crime laboratory where they analyzed fingerprints and traces.

“Idleness is just not my thing,” Bob continued. “And don’t give me work cleaning up the salvage yard. I’m not in the mood for that now. It’s too hot out there.”

“If there is any work, then Jupe should do it,” Pete added, seemingly indignant. “I think I’ll go to the beach—surfing or swimming or—”

That was as far as he got. For at that moment, the trailer door opened with a squeak and Jupiter stuck his head through the door, grinning broadly. “Hey fellas. Why are you two looking so bored?” He came all the way in and sat down. As he did so, he whistled a tune to himself, probably to show his good mood.

Bob looked demonstratively past the First Investigator and said to Pete: “For me there is only one explanation for Jupe’s good mood. We were wrong all along when we thought the Cold Gate fridge was empty. He must have found a pack of sweets in there.”

This crazy idea made the Second Investigator laugh. “Great, Bob—but I’ll counter your theory with the fact that the stuff would have rotted long ago in this heat.”

Jupe did not let himself be put off. “Completely wrong! Your deductive skills leave a lot to be desired, fellas... but you have given me an idea.” Instead of finally explaining what spurred him on in such a way, he went in search of something sweet. Behind a messy pile of magazines and comics, he found what he was looking for and tore open the wrapper of a chocolate bar.

“Yoo-hoo!” said Pete as promptly as he over-emphasized.

“What is it?” Jupiter enquired.

“Are you going to tell us what’s going on or not?”

“Yes.” The First Investigator continued to eat calmly.

“Yes what?” asked Bob.

Jupiter licked his lips. “Pete asked me an ‘or’ question,” he explained, chewing on both cheeks. “As you should know, that’s quite a wrong approach. You can always answer ‘yes’ to that. In this case, yes... I will tell you what’s going on, or yes... I will not tell you.”

His two friends exchanged a meaningful look.

“I’m not sure,” said Bob, “which is harder to bear—the dull boredom or Jupe, who has decided to win the gold medal in a new sport—‘Nerves to Death’!”

“And yet the solution is so simple, fellas.” Jupiter pulled a folded envelope from his trouser pocket and casually threw it on the table. The return address was printed on the top left: ‘RUXTON UNIVERSITY’.

“Are you saying we got a response after all?” asked Bob.

Jupe grinned even wider than before. “Well, that’s obvious.”

“What I meant by that is whether we have a positive response. We have been accepted for the special programme?”

“Exactly that!” As Jupiter said this, the Second Investigator pounced on the envelope and pulled out some letters.

The three friends had learned about a special programme at nearby Ruxton University before the summer holidays. This year, the winter semester there started two weeks earlier than the school year at their high school. So while the students of Rocky Beach were still enjoying their holidays, normal teaching already started at Ruxton. The university administration took advantage of this circumstance to make Rocky Beach High a unique offer—fifteen students were given the opportunity to get a taste of university life at Ruxton. Those who wanted to take part could choose a course and attend the classes. All applicants had to explain why they should be chosen.

Of course, The Three Investigators had used this opportunity and submitted their documents. They had given the address of their detective agency as their common address. Because now, in what felt like an eternity, there was no case to investigate, the special programme in Ruxton came just in time! The three boys had all but given up hope of being accepted because the classes were to start in two days. It seemed too late, after all, they had to arrive the very next day and then live in a university dormitory for a fortnight!

Pete waved the first sheet. “Okay, first there is an apology that the acceptance letter is so late. The university administration assumed that the letters would have been sent out long ago. The first acceptance letter goes to Jupiter. He is accepted for the course he applied for: ‘Psychology’ with a focus on systemic methods of analysis. That would not be for me. I don’t even understand the course title.”

“But that’s quite logical,” said the First Investigator. “That means that the—”

“It’s okay,” Pete interrupted and grabbed the second sheet. “This is for you, Bob. Just as you requested, you’ll be taking the ‘Journalism’ course, with a focus on investigative research.”

“Good for my role in records and research for The Three Investigators!” Bob grinned like a Cheshire cat.

Pete handed the letter to his friend and looked at the last sheet. “And this is my acceptance. I am accepted in ‘Spor—’” He broke off in mid-word, squinted his eyes for a moment and stared at the text again. “What is this?”

It didn’t say what he had expected. It was not ‘Sports Science’ with a focus on dynamics in team sports.

“‘Creative Poetry’ with a focus on experimental poetry?” said the Second Investigator, stunned. “Can one of you tell me what that means?”

“What?” Jupiter took the letter from his friend’s hand. “That’s... well Pete, I’m sorry, I didn’t notice this earlier.” He started to giggle groundlessly.

“What are you laughing at? Experimental poetry writing? That sounds horrible!”

The First Investigator visibly struggled to pull himself together. “Sorry, Pete! But I was just trying to imagine you writing poetry, probably surrounded by a bunch of girls who—”

“I don’t find that funny at all!” the Second Investigator interrupted so forcefully.

“I’m sure that was a mistake,” Bob said. “Why don’t you call Ruxton? There’s a contact number on the letterhead.”

Pete didn’t hesitate for a second and grabbed the phone. He switched on the loudspeaker so that his friends could listen in.

It rang three times until a bored voice answered: “Ruxton University Administration. Good afternoon, Jeremy Bright speaking. What can I do for you?”

“My name is Pete Crenshaw, I go to Rocky Beach High and I’ve been accepted for the special programme.”

“Congratulations.”

“There is a problem though.”

“And what would that be?”

“It’s for the wrong course.”

Mr Bright hesitated. “What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said. The letter indicates a completely wrong course.”

“This cannot be. We have only offered the courses that have been specifically requested. That’s the whole point of the programme.”

Pete rolled his eyes. “But I’ve been assigned the wrong course.”

“This cannot be...” Jeremy Bright insisted in his best civil servant thinking, because what couldn’t be, didn’t exist.

“Listen, I can read and that’s why I know that—”

“Take it easy. What was your name? Shaw?”

“Crenshaw,” the Second Investigator corrected him. “Pete Crenshaw.”

“Hold on a second, I’ll pull up your records in the computer system. Stay on the line.” A beep was heard through the loudspeaker, then only a low buzz.

Pete drummed his fingers restlessly on the table top until Mr Bright finally spoke up: “I’ve found your records... and as might have been expected, you’re on the right course —‘Creative Poetry’ with a focus on experimental poetry. Interesting. You’re the only male participant.”

A low snort sounded from Jupiter.

“Exactly!” said Pete with effortless control. “And that’s not the course I chose! I applied for ‘Sports Science’.”

“Oh?” Bright cleared his throat. “Then there must be a computer error here. Hang on a sec.”

The game began again. Again some time passed—this time almost two minutes, until Mr Bright spoke up again. “I’m sorry, but there’s nothing I can do about it now. The ‘Sports Science’ course is fully booked, just like all the other course places. I can only fit you in if someone rejects the placement at ‘Sports Science’ at the last minute, but don’t get your hopes up on that happening.”

“But—”

“Again, I’m sorry and I will try my best, but in the meantime, I’m afraid you will have to attend the poetry course. The two courses have a similar course number, so someone must have made a mistake in data entry. Give your course a try, and maybe you’ll enjoy writing poetry. You can discover completely new sides of yourself.”

Pete resigned himself to his fate, said goodbye and hung up.

Giggling, Jupiter then belted out:

*Pete Crenshaw, he’s the one;
In a midst of girls, he’ll have fun;
He reveals feeling, heart, and love;
A challenge he’ll rise above.*

“Very funny, really,” said Pete. “A little pity would be in order, as is the custom among friends!”

Bob stood up, went to him and patted him on the shoulder. “My friend, how I pity you—but when I laugh, don’t get mad!”

2. Something Fishy

A little later, The Three Investigators separated. Everyone hurried home, which for Jupiter meant only a few steps across the salvage yard. He wanted to give the good news to his uncle Titus and his aunt Mathilda, with whom he had been living since his parents died.

Pete and Bob cycled home to let their parents know and to pack.

When Bob entered his house, only his father was there, sitting in front of a laptop, probably working on a new report for the newspaper.

“Guess what, Dad,” Bob said. “You know I applied for that journalism special programme at Ruxton. I’ve been accepted! It starts the day after tomorrow! I’m really excited to follow in your footsteps.”

Mr Andrews had studied at Ruxton in his youth and gained his first journalistic experience there. He had been working in this profession for many years now. “Oh, it actually worked out, did it? That’s... that’s great. I’m happy for you.” However, he didn’t sound at all as if he meant it.

“What’s wrong, Dad?”

Mr Andrews averted his eyes, raised his hands and massaged his temples with the thumb and forefinger of both hands. “Oh, nothing.” He shook his head. “I was just so focussed on my work. It’s the report on the toxic waste in the old factory building down by the harbour, you know.”

Bob knew his father well enough not to believe him. “Oh come on, Dad! That’s definitely not all! What’s wrong?”

“Nothing really...” his father replied. “I guess you’ll be gone for a fortnight, so that will take up the rest of your summer holidays... I had thought that we could have gone for a short trip somewhere.”

That didn’t sound very convincing to Bob either, more like an excuse. But he didn’t probe further, not wanting to have his anticipation completely spoiled.

“I thought you would be happy for me. I’m going to where you studied too. That’s great.” Without giving his father a chance to reply, he retreated to his room and gathered what he wanted to take with him. After all, he had to leave the very next day.

So he piled up whole stacks of books and clothes. Whether he should take one file of an old case as illustrative material about his previous experiences? He had often done exemplary research and gathered amazing information from countless sources.

He quickly forgot his disappointment about his father’s response. Later, he got thirsty and walked out of his room through the hallway and the living room towards the kitchen.

The door to it was only ajar. He was about to open it all the way when he heard his father’s voice.

“Ruxton, yes!” said Mr Andrews. Obviously he was on the phone.

Bob remained rooted to the spot. Although he immediately felt guilty for eavesdropping, he wanted to hear what his father had to say about the subject. Who was he talking to?

“What about the Teumessian fox?” Mr Andrews paused for what was surely the other party talking. “You’re right,” Mr Andrews finally said in a tone of disgust. Again he was silent for a few seconds. “Okay, we’ll have another chat about it later.”

Bob heard the sound of his father hanging up. He hesitated briefly before opening the door.

“Bob,” Mr Andrews greeted him. “I’m sorry about earlier. I’m glad it worked out for you.”

“Thank you.” Bob pointed to their cordless phone. “Oh, here’s the phone! I’ve been looking for it. Did you just make a phone call?” Again, a guilty conscience plagued him for asking his father such a trick question, but he wanted to see how he would react.

Mr Andrews took the phone and handed it to his son. “Yes, but I don’t need it any more.”

“Who were you talking to?”

“Oh, nothing important. It was about work. One of the port managers. I want to do some on-the-spot research there. That’s why I have to go again. You can manage on your own, can’t you? Mum’s coming home in a couple of hours.”

He’s lying, Bob realized. His father had been talking to someone about Ruxton and had mentioned something about a fox. What had he called it? ‘Tumessy fox’? Bob had never heard that before.

In the first place, why had his father reacted so strangely when he heard that Bob was going to Ruxton? And why on earth was he hiding information from his son? Bob had never experienced that before!

Something fishy was going on...

3. Setting Off on an Adventure

This was not the first time The Three Investigators had come to Ruxton University, but they had never stayed there for very long. They had clothes and everything they needed with them in suitcases, which were currently in the back of Pete's car. This included their detective equipment which they always took with them.

During the ride, each of the boys thought about different things. Bob was looking forward to the next few days thoughtfully because he couldn't get his father's strange response out of his mind. Pete was frustrated because of the mixed-up course. Only Jupiter was looking forward to his psychology course.

On reaching the university, they made their way to an administration building where the selected students of Rocky Beach High were to receive further information.

The three of them entered a room where they were greeted by a lean man with a bald head and nickel glasses, fiddling with the knot of his grey tie. He was enthroned behind a huge, meticulously tidy desk. Next to the computer keyboard was a glass of water and—the boys had to look twice to believe it—a spider the size of a fist.

"Before you ask," the man said instead of a greeting, "the spider is my son's and no, it's not alive or preserved, it's plastic." His voice did not sound as dull as he looked. Apparently his appearance was deceiving.

"Yes, thank you," Pete said. "Good afternoon. We are—"

"I know," the man interrupted him. "I recognize you from the photos of your applications. I'm good at remembering faces. You're Peter Shaw."

Faces perhaps, Pete thought, but names apparently not. "Crenshaw," he said. "Pete Crenshaw." Immediately following, he tried to shine himself. "By the way, I recognize you by your voice. You're Mr Bright."

Jeremy Bright, with whom Pete had spoken on the phone the day before, nodded hastily and pulled an envelope from the pile of files on the edge of the desk. "Sorry about your course. This is for the three of you." Pete took the envelope.

"You'll find all the other information in there," Mr Bright explained. "Because you gave the same address, I bundled it all together. You'll see on the sheets where your rooms are for the next two weeks, where and when your first class is... and things like that. If you have any questions, come by here."

A short time later, The Three Investigators were standing in front of Copernicus Hall, a three-storey building made of red bricks. It was one of several dormitories for Ruxton students, and was near to a large, gravelled car park where Pete's car was parked.

According to the programme information, each floor of the dormitory was partitioned into several apartments, each with four single rooms. The boys were to live in one of the apartments on the second floor. Mr Bright had handed them a set of keys.

They walked up the staircase next to a measly palm tree in an old pot. On the second floor, there was a glass door to their apartment. Behind it was a narrow hallway leading to four tiny rooms, a bathroom, and a quite comfortably furnished kitchenette.

In one of the rooms, a scrawny boy was filling the built-in cupboard from a shiny hard-shell suitcase. He was wearing trousers made of fine, dark fabric. A spotless white short-sleeved shirt flapped around his torso. His arms were as thin as a matchstick.

"Hello," Bob said. "We're apparently going to be staying next to each other for the next fortnight. I don't remember seeing you at Rocky Beach High before."

"I can explain that," the boy replied with a nasal-sounding voice. "We just moved to the city during the holidays. The fact that I was chosen for the special programme here is because of my amazing skills."

The Three Investigators exchanged meaningful glances. This was going to be fun. They gave their names, the boy introduced himself as Taylor-Jackson Smith.

They had no time to chat for long. In less than an hour, there was a small welcome event for the students who had arrived.

"Are we going together, Taylor?" Pete asked their new housemate.

"Taylor-Jackson, please," he said. "I prefer to be called by my full first name. Since my surname is unfortunately completely ordinary, at least my double-barrelled first name reflects the specialness of my being."

"Sure," Pete said, managing the feat of only rolling his eyes inwardly.

"And no, I'd rather go alone." Taylor-Jackson closed the door.

A little later, The Three Investigators walked across the university grounds. A lot of students hurried across the campus or stood together in groups. Although it was already early evening, the heat was still intense.

"Jupe, I've noticed one thing," Bob said. "I thought until now that you sometimes talked strangely, but Jack is going to give you tough competition."

"Jack?" Pete had to grin. "Why don't you call him by his full double-barrelled first name and not just a piece of it?"

"You guys are mean," the First Investigator said. "I like him, sort of."

"Really?"

"Why not? We have to at least give him another chance." Jupiter grinned. "After all, Jack is our housemate for a fortnight..."

They reached the building where the welcome was to take place. It was built on a slope and consisted of several nested individual houses. A curved staircase led to a wide entrance portal that opened automatically. A large sign in the reception area directed them to room 03-11, where a Mrs Breckenridge was going to welcome the students from Rocky Beach.

A couple of students were already there. The Three Investigators only knew Julie Afflan by name and greeted her. For the rest, they had seen them many times at school, but they were from other classes.

Jupiter, Pete and Bob sat down. In the row in front of them sat a girl with short-cropped brown hair in a cloud of perfume scent. The rest of the participants in the special programme were still trickling in, with Taylor-Jackson arriving at the last minute.

Jupiter noticed too late that there were some bowls of nibbles on a table in front of the window. He would have liked to help himself, but at that moment a gaunt elderly woman entered the room. A short, stocky man walked directly behind her, almost as if he were her bodyguard.

The omnipresent restless murmur immediately died away. The woman wore an elegant costume and a curly hairstyle of greying hair. She had secured her glasses at the temples with a string of pearls.

“My name is Francine Breckenridge and it is thanks to me that you are here. From my late husband’s estate, I have set up a foundation that supports the university, and this foundation—the Breckenridge Foundation—also pays the costs for this programme, which is why you can live in the dormitory for free.”

Restrained applause echoed through the room.

“Unfortunately, I don’t have much time because another commitment is waiting for me,” the lady continued. “Mr Bright will therefore continue on with this welcome event. You have all dealt with him already, and he will continue to be your contact. I wish you a good insight into university life. And who knows, maybe some of you will soon be studying here and adding to Ruxton’s academic fame.”

She let her gaze wander through the room and then said: “I hope so.” Without another word she left, followed by the little man. Mr Bright took her place.

The rest of the event was yawningly boring. No one was interested in Mr Bright’s organizational briefing, and no one asked smart questions because everyone was eagerly waiting for the next day when the courses would finally start.

In the small supermarket near their dormitory, The Three Investigators bought everything for breakfast. When they went to their rooms later, they were righteously tired and soon went to bed. They did not meet their housemate Taylor-Jackson.

4. Poison Dart Frogs

The next morning their classes didn't start until ten o'clock, which meant that The Three Investigators could sleep in.

When Jupiter came into the kitchenette in his pyjamas, Taylor-Jackson washed his breakfast dishes and put them neatly on the shelf. "I'm just leaving," he said.

Jupiter looked at his watch. "Does your class start that early? Ours all start at ten o'clock."

"I'm going jogging," Taylor-Jackson said. "A healthy mind can only live in a healthy body." He gave the stocky Jupiter a disapproving look.

All of a sudden, the First Investigator was no longer so sure whether he could actually find anything likeable about their housemate... or whether he wanted to. He preferred his two colleagues as conversation partners.

Bob also shuffled in in his pyjamas. Pete came in shortly afterwards freshly showered and looking outrageously fit.

Half an hour later, they were on their way. Their classes were held in different buildings in the large university campus. Jupiter could tell that Bob was depressed. "Forget about your father's reaction," he said. Bob had told his friends everything on the way to Ruxton.

"You say that so easily. My dad lied to me! And I just can't remember what exactly he called this fox—something like 'Tumessy fox'... Is that even a breed of fox? I'll have to check on this."

"Now go to your journalism class first!" Jupe urged. "You can always look into this later!" With that, they parted.

Jupiter's psychology class was at the far end of the campus. Whole hordes of students hurried across the grounds. One boy's cap was blown off his head by the strong wind. He hurried after it, but it quickly slid across the ground. Many students were riding bicycles to their classes. Some older ones, probably lecturers, came towards him with briefcases or folders tucked under their arms.

Soon it emptied all around Jupiter. The psychology building was next to a small botanical garden. Frogs croaked from a pond there and a few birds flew between the low trees and bushes. The strong wind made the leaves rustle.

There were two buildings in front of the First Investigator. The one at the back had to be his destination; the one in front was completely fenced in. On the small gate in the garden fence was a name plate with the words: 'Lemuel Garvine, Building Manager'. Below it were his office hours in the administration wing and a mobile phone number for emergencies.

Where on earth had Jupiter heard that name before? He noticed that on the small lawn next to the path leading to the front door, a huge glass box was flashing in the morning sun.

He wanted to go on, but something drew his attention. The First Investigator looked up and shielded his eyes from the sun with the flat of his hand. There were birds—many birds—directly above him!

"What... what is that?" he gasped. He narrowed his eyes briefly, but the sight remained the same. A flock of at least two dozen birds remained stationary in the air as if frozen. They

only flapped their wings a little, although in this wind they would have had to flap wildly back and forth to even maintain their position!

Jupiter took a few steps backwards to see them even better. Suddenly, the birds turned and flew away as fast as an arrow in a northerly direction. They disappeared behind the small house where Lemuel Garvine lived.

Now, in a moment when he wanted to think about something completely different, Jupe suddenly remembered where he knew the name from. Mr Garvine had been mentioned in the programme information as a contact person in case there were problems with the rooms in the dormitory.

The door of the building opened squeakily and a man came out. Despite the not exactly cold weather, he wore a thin, black knitted cap pulled down over his forehead, ears and the back of his head. The three-day beard added something striking to his face together with his ice-grey eyes. He walked to the enormous glass box glistening in the sun.

"Excuse me," the First Investigator called out to him. "Are you Mr Garvine?"

"That's me. What's up?" His voice sounded fresh and sympathetic. Jupiter couldn't really guess his age. He might be in his forties. His jeans looked faded.

"Did you see that?" Jupe asked.

"What? Oh, come in first! The gate is open."

The First Investigator pushed open the gate and went to the friendly caretaker.

"The birds," Jupe continued. "There was a whole flock in the air just now. That looked... well... they looked strange." He was annoyed with himself for stuttering, but he had been able to look into the glass box for the first time—and what he saw inside took his breath away for a moment.

Lemuel Garvine shrugged his shoulders. "Birds, you say? It sometimes happens that they behave strangely. Probably because of my little pets." The 'little pets' were crouched in the glass box—a terrarium that stood on a wheeled contraption! A dozen or more fist-sized animals sat inside—lemon yellow frogs with big black eyes.

"They're poison dart frogs, aren't they?" asked Jupiter.

"Well spotted! Are you studying biology?"

"Not that," explained the First Investigator, "but I read a lot. Tell me, aren't these animals poisonous?"

"Very poisonous indeed! The *Phylllobates terribilis*, commonly known as the terrible 'poison dart frog', is one of the most poisonous animals around! You may know them from the Chocó Indians of Colombia, who made their arrow poison from the skin poison of these frogs."

"How can you keep such poisonous animals? That's just—"

"Don't be afraid! In captivity, these animals gradually lose their poison and the offspring no longer have any."

"And your pets are such offspring?"

Garvine grinned. "Who knows?" He laughed. "Anyway, I treat them to some sunlight now and then. They can't always live under the heat lamp inside the house."

Jupiter had nothing to say to that. Besides, the mere presence of the frogs did not seem like a good explanation for the birds' strange behaviour.

But a glance at his watch told him that he had to move on if he didn't want to miss the beginning of his class. He said goodbye and hurried on.

When Pete entered the class room, he felt dizzy. The room was filled to bursting point with about fifty female students.

He thought to himself: "Ninety-nine percent girls, and me". A moment later he had to grin when it occurred to him that Jupiter would certainly have pointed out to him in his inimitable way that it was actually ninety-eight per cent girls.

A dozen female students wore pastel-coloured baggy dresses. Pete's friend Kelly would probably have called this style of dress 'eco'. Others were garishly made up, with clothes so colourful that it hurt the eyes.

The girl with the short-cropped brown hair, whom he had seen the evening before during the welcome event, belonged more to the 'normal' ones. She looked athletic and well-trained, as he now noticed. The only empty seat was right next to her. Pete sat down with a curt 'hi'.

"Hi," she replied. Just like yesterday, a cloud of perfume surrounded her. It smelled fresh and quite pleasant, Pete had to admit.

"You're from Rocky Beach High, aren't you?" Pete asked her. "I've noticed you there many times!" She smiled broadly at him.

This is going to be fun, Pete thought.

"I'm Samantha Shirona," she said. "Sounds stupid to me. Blame my parents."

He had to laugh. "I don't think it's stupid, I think it's great. It's perfect for a poetry course where you have to write poems."

Samantha beamed. "I think it's cool that you're taking this course. Seriously—you're the only boy here. Pretty brave of you."

At first Pete wanted to tell her about the data entry mistake, but decided against it. Why shouldn't he take advantage of it? "Thank you," he said and now also gave his name.

"We're the only ones from the special programme in this class," Samantha said. "All the others are regular students in their first semester."

Before Pete could take a closer look, the lecturer came in. She introduced herself as 'A.C. Berany', "... and you may call me A.C." she added.

Pete was convinced from the first second that she was peculiar as she wore a wide straw hat with a red rose stuck to it! She seemed to be floating in other spheres.

"Before I say something spectacular," said A.C. Berany, "let's find out together what you're made of!"

Pete wished for a hole to sink into.

"What is poetry to you? What are poems?" asked A.C. "Everyone can only answer this question for themselves! That's why we start with a creative task. Don't take long, write down what comes to your mind! Your poem should show how important it is in the early morning to move and admire the beauty of creation so that your thoughts can clear for the new day."

Aha, thought Pete, so this is important.

"Now," said Miss Berany, "write down your first feelings describing just that."

All around Pete, everyone started writing while he wondered what on earth he was even doing here. He longed for the sports class.

Samantha turned to Pete and urged him on: "Come on, Pete!"

Full of despair, the Second Investigator put something down on paper. It was important to exercise in the morning and admire the beauty of nature to get the thoughts going? What nonsense! But, if he had to write something...

Five minutes later, when A.C. announced the end of this exercise, Pete looked at a plethora of crossed-out words and scribbles on the piece of paper in front of him. Only two lines had survived. At least they rhymed in the end. It was better than nothing.

His nightmare finally turned into a disaster when A.C. pointed at him, of all people. She held a list of names in her hand. “You, Pete Crenshaw, may share your poem first!”

“Me? ... uh...” Pete’s palms moistened as he imagined that everyone was about to hear his richly awkward lines. “You know my name?” he asked as a distraction.

“It’s not difficult—you’re the only male participant!”

“Right, yes.” The Second Investigator thought about how nice it would be now to hunt down a criminal or solve an ancient mystery in some crypt, even with a horde of disgusting spiders crawling over his feet. He stood up. His chair moved back with a creak. “My... er... poem is called ‘Morning Exercise’. I didn’t quite get that far. Actually, it’s just... uh... just two lines.”

“Be brave!” urged A.C. Berany good-humouredly.

Pete cleared his throat and read off the two-liner that was written on his sheet:

*I wake up, and get myself fit;
Only then, I think about it!*

Then there was dead silence in the room. Pete sat down jerkily. “Uh... Was that too short and simple—”

“No, no,” Miss Berany interrupted. “Don’t say anything!”

“Wonderful,” Samantha whispered to him from the next seat.

“Really?” he asked quietly.

“Well done, Mr Crenshaw,” Miss Berany praised. “Short poems can convey intimate moments with simple, specific, compelling words. As there are limited words, every one is significant... Short poems are like cliff hangers. It doesn’t matter if you use simple words... Keep it up, Pete!”

Actually, Pete didn’t know what he was doing. He only knew he had to cook up some lines that somehow rhyme.

“Who wants to go next?” the lecturer asked. Several hands shot up. “Please,” A.C. said and pointed to a girl in the front row.

It was one of the ecos. Unlike Pete, she not only stood up, but walked forward and turned to face them. To the Second Investigator, her movements seemed strangely angular and awkward.

She must be terribly nervous, the way she looked at the crowd with a strangely absent and fixed gaze... or could that no longer be explained by nervousness? Her movements were almost wooden and choppy, completely unnatural! Almost as if under hypnosis...

“I am Alexandra,” she said in a monotone voice. Then, like a robot, she read out an extremely turgid poem. Pete didn’t have the slightest desire to listen to any more of it. But what else could he do? Alexandra was followed by other girls who at least behaved somewhat normally.

Finally, a dark-haired student named Corvy ventured forward. “My poem is called ‘Midnight Truth’,” she said. Pete stifled a yawn just before she began:

*The moon rises high above the roof;
And out comes the midnight owl;
You will finally know the truth;
When the Teumessian fox decides to howl!*

From one moment to the next, the Second Investigator was electrified. It couldn’t be! Had he just misheard? Or had the girl really mentioned the... Teumessian fox? It couldn’t be

a coincidence! It had to be the same animal that Mr Andrews had mentioned on the phone!

Who would have thought, it went through Pete's mind, that even a poetry course could be interesting...

5. The Futuristic Mobile Phone

When Jupiter entered his lecture hall, he saw that there were about thirty students. There were still many empty seats and he chose one somewhere in the middle. While waiting for the class to start, he looked around, observing some of the students that would be his classmates for the next two weeks.

“Aaaargh!” Suddenly, someone cried out. Jupe looked around and saw that it was a freckled red-haired girl. One other student was about to rush to her aid, but realized that it was nothing serious. The girl looked deathly pale and pointed with trembling fingers to her table, from which she staggered backwards. “A spider!” she stammered. “Get rid of the spider!”

The First Investigator rolled his eyes. That was just a totally harmless common house spider! Another girl slipped a sheet of paper under the spider and used it to move it towards the window.

The psychology course had been running for almost an hour and it was interesting all around. It was a real challenge for Jupiter.

Everything was good... or could well have been... if it hadn't been for Taylor-Jackson Smith.

The housemate of The Three Investigators also attended the course and, in Jupiter's opinion, he was the biggest smart-ass who had ever seen the light of day. The First Investigator could have lived with that, but Taylor-Jackson was also a brilliant smart-ass, which meant nothing other than that he outshone Jupiter.

The lecturer, a certain Dr Fuller, had a special eye on the two students who were attending her course as guests. She watched them very closely and more than once confronted them with questions that required logical thinking skills. The First Investigator had always prided himself on his skills in this area, but Taylor-Jackson outdid him.

“Even the Greek philosopher Aristotle made considerations about right thinking,” Dr Fuller just said. “He describes it as consistent and free of contradictions. We call this kind of thinking ‘logical’. Mistakes in logic often bring tragic consequences.”

Jupiter could tell you a thing or two about that—it was part of his everyday life as an investigator. Those who drew the wrong conclusions might not find the solution to a criminal case. Then the culprit escaped and the crime went unpunished.

“Can anyone give me an example?” the lecturer asked.

Jupiter was still thinking about which of their cases to cite when Taylor-Jackson's hand already shot up. Darn!

Dr Fuller nodded at him. “The accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant was due to errors in the staff's logical assessment of the overall situation,” Taylor-Jackson said.

The lecturer was enthusiastic and continued in her explanations. Jupe could no longer concentrate properly. He was so annoyed—especially about the sardonic grin that Jack, as he only called him in his mind, gave him. He probably judged the situation the same as Jupiter—the two were bitter competitors.

The rest of the course passed quickly and soon it was twelve noon. “We meet in two hours for the afternoon session,” Dr Fuller declared and all the participants rushed out of the room.

Taylor-Jackson was no longer to be seen, and most of the other students were already out of sight. The wind had died down. Jupiter wanted to go to his room in the dormitory. Maybe he would meet Bob there. He was curious to see how his friend had fared in his journalism course—certainly not as bad as him.

Pete only had a half-hour lunch break from his poetry class. But even if the Second Investigator had ended up in the wrong class, at least he didn’t have to deal with a Taylor-Jackson.

Frogs were croaking again from the botanical garden. Immediately, the First Investigator remembered the caretaker Lemuel Garvine and his terrarium with poison dart frogs. Quite automatically, the strange behaviour of the birds over Garvine’s house came to his mind. He looked up to the sky but could not find anything out of the ordinary.

He walked on thoughtfully and wondered whether he should go to the cafeteria for lunch. His stomach grumbled heartily at the thought. Good—that decision had probably been made.

He was walking past Garvine’s house when he saw something lying on the ground. It was flashing in the sun, lying between the fence slats in front of the caretaker’s garden and half protruding onto the pavement. The First Investigator bent down and picked up the metal... thing. He had never seen a device like this before, and even when he squinted hard once and opened his eyes again, the bizarre sight did not change.

What he held in his hand looked like a gadget from a science fiction movie. It was a little bigger than the palm of his hand and the small screen was dark, apart from several glowing dots wandering across it. Several tiny antennae protruded from the edge, almost as thin as hairs. They were soft to the touch and grass-green.

The device was unusually light, as if it were not made of metal or even plastic. This was probably because it was as thin as a few pages of paper laid on top of each other—and it could be rolled up like a plastic sheet! Somehow the sight of it made Jupiter think of a futuristic computer or communication device—something that could possibly be a mobile phone.

The First Investigator looked around. There was no one around who could have missed it. Should he ring Mr Garvine’s doorbell? But it looked more like someone had lost it on the pavement so it could just as easily belong to the caretaker as anyone else.

Whether it actually worked, the First Investigator did not believe it. He tapped the screen. Maybe it was some kind of sensor surface. Nothing happened. Most mysterious!

Jupiter marched off again. A good puzzle like this really whetted his appetite. It was therefore not easy for him to go to the Lost Property Office to hand in the device. However, on reaching there, he found that the office had just closed and would not be open again until the morning of the day after tomorrow. Not exactly very customer-friendly hours, Jupiter thought, and he walked contentedly to the cafeteria.

Well, that way he could show the phone to his friends later. Their eyeballs would pop out!

Pete used the half-hour lunch break to quickly get something to eat at the hot dog cart parked next to his faculty building. Samantha Shirona did not leave his side. She bought herself something too, but before she took her first bite, she took a small bottle out of her handbag and dusted herself again with a cloud of perfume. It was really hard to get used to it.

Pete courageously continued to eat, even though he thought his hot dog tasted of roses and some kind of sweet fruit—anything but appetising.

“Your poem was really interesting,” Samantha said. “I like guys who stand by their feelings.”

The Second Investigator searched desperately for the right words and bit down hard. That bought him time. So he was standing by his feelings? And that’s what she heard from the two silly lines he had squeezed out?

“Yes...” he finally said. Not exactly a super-intelligent comment, he had to admit himself.

Samantha was not bothered by this. She continued to adore him. Shortly before the end of the break, she said goodbye, saying that she had to powder her nose quickly. So Pete went back to the classroom alone.

As he sat down on his seat, a student was handing out muffins. She was one of the ecos, as he called them, thinking of Kelly.

“You didn’t get one before break,” purred the student whose name he couldn’t remember. She spoke English with a typical German accent. “It’s my birthday today, you know, and it’s so common for us to bring something for the others in the class.”

“Thank you,” Pete said, taking the pastry which looked horribly dry and smelled strange. “And congratulations, uh...”

“Anne!” the birthday girl beamed and continued walking.

Earlier during the break, Pete had seen Samantha eating half of such a muffin and then throwing the remainder into the bin outside. He vowed that he would definitely not eat it and quickly let the hideous muffin disappear into his pocket. Maybe he could slip it to the obnoxious Taylor-Jackson.

Shortly afterwards, Samantha came in and sat down next to him. Thanks to her perfume, he at least no longer had to endure the strange muffin smell. Everything had its good sides, he just had to recognize them first.

“Guess what,” Pete whispered. “I’ve got one of those awful muffins too.”

Samantha looked at him. “Oh yeah?” Her voice sounded venomous. “And who cares?”

The Second Investigator was stunned. “Sorry, I thought—”

“Yes, yes, you just think. Because you’re a boy, of course the whole world revolves around you!”

“But Samantha, I...”

“Just leave me alone!”

She was like a changed person. Pete no longer understood the world. What had he done to annoy her? Outside, she had said goodbye to him in a normal way—if her manner of saying goodbye was considered normal.

Miss Berany returned and the lesson began again. Not all the students had recited their lines from the morning yet, because some poems had sparked off heated discussions. In Pete’s eyes, all this talk had been completely idiotic.

A few minutes later, a girl stuttered something about sunbeams, clouds and azure skies on which planes wrote words with their contrails. Samantha turned to Pete, smiled languidly at him and whispered: “Have you ever heard such nonsense?”

“No,” Pete said tersely and in a dismissive tone.

“What’s wrong?” asked Samantha.

Pete was confused. Just a while ago, Samantha snapped at him as if she hated him, but he decided not to bring it up. “Nothing,” he said instead.

“Good.” Samantha chewed nervously on her lower lip. “Do you want to maybe go for a jog or something tonight? I really need to get some exercise.”

“I... uh...”

“Quiet back there!” shouted A.C.

Samantha looked at him from wide eyes and silently formed a ‘please!’ with her lips, suspiciously approaching a kissing mouth.

Pete nodded hastily to have his peace. He told himself that this was not a date. It certainly wasn’t. After all, there was Kelly, his girlfriend. But this meeting wasn’t about romance at all.

There was something wrong with Samantha...

6. The Secret of Ruxton

Bob could hardly believe it—during the past two hours, he had written ten pages in his pad. His hand really hurt. Professor Roalstad, the head of the journalism course, was not only a fantastic and funny teacher, but also had more than twenty years of experience as an active reporter. He had worked for several large daily newspapers. He knew a lot of tricks of the trade, and always gave practical tips for budding journalists in between.

The time in class had flown by. Bob could have listened for hours more.

“We won’t see each other again until the afternoon, in three hours,” Mr Roalstad said in conclusion. He was wearing a Hawaiian shirt and a baseball cap, so he didn’t look like a typical teacher at all, but more like a slightly ageing tourist. The small beer belly made him look rather homely.

“I hope you’re excited to see what happens next! After all, I was your age once, so I know that some events are boring as watching paint dry,” he added and cleared his throat. “Believe it or not, I even sat in this very room as a student.”

“You studied here at Ruxton?” asked Bob.

“Yes, exactly,” Roalstad explained. “And that was longer than I would have liked! My granddaughter could be teaching here by now.” He rolled his eyes. “But whatever, I’m not an old geezer yet. So, see you later.” He grabbed his briefcase and waited until the crowd at the door dissipated because everyone wanted to leave at the same time.

Bob did not throw himself into the mix, but went forward to the lecturer. “It’s a great course, sir.”

Mr Roalstad eyed him through the slightly tinted glasses. “Pleased to meet you. You’re the student from Rocky Beach, right?”

“That’s right,” Bob said.

“Sorry, I can’t remember everyone’s name and I wasn’t even trying because I wanted to treat you the same as the normal students.”

“Great. My name is Bob Andrews,” Bob said. It seemed to him that Roalstad then looked at him thoughtfully.

“Bob Andrews,” repeated the professor, adding a stretched ‘Aaa-ha’. “And how old are you?”

Bob told him.

“Yes,” Roalstad remarked, which was hardly an appropriate answer.

“You seem puzzled, sir.”

“You’re listening pretty closely, aren’t you?”

“That’s one of the principles of good journalism,” Bob replied confidently. “Didn’t you say so yourself? Besides, I’ve been practising it for years. I do the research for our detective agency and maintain the records, which now include many cases.”

“Detective agency?” Mr Roalstad raised an eyebrow.

Bob handed him one of their business cards, which he always carried with him just like his two colleagues. It said:



Mr Roalstad eyed it. “Thank you,” he said, without lifting his eyes from the small card, and then let it disappear into his trouser pocket.

But Bob was not satisfied with that. “You also said that you often have to follow up until you get the important information. That’s why I ask again why you reacted the way you did when you heard my name.”

“How did I react?” asked Roalstad.

“I... well... it seemed to me that you...” Bob was searching for the right words.

Professor Roalstad laughed. “That’s all right. You’re right, you know. I can remember, you know. You do look a lot like your father. John Andrews is your father, isn’t he? Didn’t he have three given names?”

“Four, to be exact,” Bob replied, puzzled. “John William Melvin Roger Andrews. You know him?”

“I taught him, here at Ruxton. He was a good student—maybe my best, until...” Mr Roalstad faltered.

“Until what?”

“Oh, forget it. He went somewhere else at some point. I don’t know the exact circumstances.”

“But you still remember him?”

Roalstad tapped his temple and adjusted his baseball cap. “My brain box works satisfactorily well most of the time, at least for really important things. You know, when people ask me where my son, who is a professor of physics over in New York, got his brains... I always answer, from his mother, because I still have mine!” He laughed again. Bob snorted. “But don’t tell my wife,” the professor demanded before marching hurriedly out of the room.

The traffic jam in front of the door had dissipated in the meantime. Only then did Bob notice how elegantly Mr Roalstad had got out of the way so as not to have to give further information. That, too, was the mark of a good journalist—knowing when to make an exit and how to make it look inconspicuous.

Bob left the building. He wanted to go back to his room to have a snack. Fortunately, the lunch break left him enough time for that, unlike Pete’s. The afternoon classes all took place at different times. The three friends could not meet again until the evening.

Bob went down a few steps onto a lawn. There, neatly trimmed bushes grew and provided shade for some benches. Most of the benches were occupied by young people stretched out in the sun as if they were lying on a lounger. On the opposite side was a car park, where at least a dozen cars lined up.

Bob crossed the small lawn and was walking along a large building with a wall of dirty glass bricks when he heard something.

That was an eerie howl... or a wail? Did that come from a human being? No! Or was that a dog? Bob wasn’t sure. Maybe a predator? But how could it be in the middle of Ruxton

University grounds? The thought made his heart beat faster.

The sound turned into a growl, then into a shrill croak and Bob looked around frantically. All at once, he felt threatened, and that was despite the fact that the sound was actually far too quiet for him to be in any danger. Whoever or whatever was emitting it could not be in the immediate vicinity.

Abruptly it became quiet. Bob continued walking. A student came towards him. Red curls fell to her shoulders.

“Did you hear that?” he asked her.

“Huh?” She stopped and took an earphone bud out of her ear. It was only then that Bob spotted the white cables between her curls. “What did you say?”

Bob shook his head. “Oh, nothing. Sorry...” She walked off without looking back at him.

Bob listened, but heard nothing more reminiscent of the strange, indefinable croaking. He walked on, reached the dormitory and was in the hallway shortly afterwards. No one was there and Bob remained alone for the entire lunch break. He ate something and tried to call his parents. No one answered.

Later Bob went back to his class, but there was no more opportunity to talk to Mr Roalstad in private that day.

7. Mysterious Findings

In the evening, The Three Investigators finally met again and exchanged their experiences. They sat around the small table in the kitchenette with a lot of drinks between them.

“Luckily Jack is not here,” Jupiter said, “so we can talk in peace.”

Pete grinned. “Jack? Weren’t you going to give him a chance and call him, as he wishes, by his full first name?”

The First Investigator screwed up his face. “He’s in my psychology class and I don’t like him. Not at all! Jack is still far too good for him. How about—”

“TJ?” suggested Pete.

Now it was Jupiter’s turn to grin broadly. “Fits perfectly! But let’s get on to something else. I really have to show you something.”

“In a minute,” said the Second Investigator. “You won’t believe what I’ve been through in this wretched poetry class!”

“Did you have an emotional epiphany?” asked Bob in an artificial falsetto voice.

“Very funny—but no! It’s about something serious.”

Bob then learned from Pete that one of the female poetry students had mentioned the ‘Teumessian fox’, just like Bob’s father did.

“I don’t like the whole thing at all and my father has something to do with it!” Bob told his friends about Mr Roalstad, who had taught Mr Andrews in the latter’s time at Ruxton, but had not wanted to say more about it. “There is obviously a secret here in Ruxton,” Bob believed.

“Wrong,” said Pete. “A lot more than a secret! In my class, some of the female students are acting really weird.”

“I’m not surprised,” Bob said. “I also find it strange that you write poetry, so you fit in well there.”

“Very funny, Bob. But seriously! A student was moving strangely, as if under hypnosis, and Samantha... oh yes, you haven’t met her yet. She also goes to Rocky Beach High and she... how shall I put it... well, she adores me. After the break she was all dismissive and harsh at first, then shortly after she seemed to adore me again.”

“You have good self-confidence,” Bob observed.

“What can I do about it, if that’s the way it is?” Pete looked at his watch. “I have to go out again in a minute. I’m going jogging with Samantha.”

“What will Kelly say to that?” Bob asked.

“Nothing!” Pete folded his arms. “Because she won’t know. Besides, this isn’t a date! I want to find out why she’s been acting so weird. It’s investigation, nothing else.”

“Are you done?” asked Jupiter, who felt as if he had to burst because he finally wanted to tell about his experience and his find. First he told about the mysterious behaviour of the birds that had remained stationary in the sky, then he pulled out of his pocket the rolled-up mobile phone or whatever it might be. He unrolled it. The screen lay tiny and flat like a foil on his palm. “What do you say?”

Bob’s and Pete’s eyes widened. “No way,” they commented as if from the same mouth.

“That’s just it,” said the First Investigator.

Pete tapped the tip of his index finger on some of the thin, grass-green antennae that stuck out like hairs from the edge of the strange device. “Where did you get this thing? From a UFO?”

“I think somebody dropped it,” Jupiter said and explained how he found the mobile phone and why he had not been able to hand it in at the Lost Property Office.

“And this thing works?” asked Bob.

“I don’t know,” the First Investigator had to admit. “I suppose so. Just look at the display. It looks... real. Not like a toy.”

A few luminous dots constantly wandered across the display surface without any particular pattern emerging.

“Have you been able to turn it on?” asked Pete.

Jupiter shook his head. “Unfortunately not. I can’t find a place where a battery could be inserted either... or anything else that... that would be normal!”

They examined the device for some time without finding anything.

“Let’s summarize,” the First Investigator said later. “There is not just one mystery in Ruxton—but a whole lot of them. My experience as an investigator tells me that it’s all connected.”

“And how is that supposed to work, in your opinion?” asked Pete. “People as if under hypnosis, behaving sometimes this way, sometimes that; the talk of a Teumessian fox, whatever that animal might be; birds that don’t do what they’re supposed to; a strange caretaker with poison dart frogs that he likes to take out into the sun; and to top it all off, Bob’s father is involved in the whole story!”

“And it’s all garnished by a pompous housemate and a girl who makes Pete feel guilty,” added Bob.

“That’s a really good summary of the events,” Juve remarked.

“What do you think?” Bob asked. “We’ll investigate this case, right?”

Pete shook his head. “So who’s our client?”

“What about me!” Bob exclaimed. “I don’t care if it’s unusual... I want... no, I need to know what my father has to do with this Ruxton mystery!”

The Three Investigators looked at each other—and nodded at the same time. They were in agreement.

“All right,” Jupiter said. “What do we start with?”

Pete stood up. “I have to go to my meeting with Samantha and I will keep my ears open.”

Bob also walked towards the door. “And I’m going to the library to check on the Internet. Maybe I’ll find out something about this Teumessian fox!”

So Jupiter was left alone. He stowed the strange mobile phone in the secret compartment of his suitcase.

When Taylor-Jackson—‘TJ’, he thought—appeared a few minutes later, the First Investigator retreated to his room. He had no desire whatsoever to exchange a single word with the boy.

Jupiter lay down on his bed and his eyes fell shut. Soon, he fell asleep... and dreamt.

In his dream, he saw two people from behind—a man and a woman. Somehow they looked familiar to him. Where had he seen them before? The two laughed and suddenly they turned around.

For a moment, Jupiter looked at their faces, but it was too brief to recognize them properly. The next moment, they were standing quite far away, as could only happen in a dream. But Juve knew who they were. He knew not with his mind, but with his heart.

The two people were his parents, who had been dead for a long time. That's why he lived with Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus. He wanted to call his parents, shouted his mother's name, then his father's name. The sound of his voice made him jump and sit up.

His heart was beating wildly. A glance at the clock—he had been asleep for about an hour.

The door opened. "Jupe?" It was Bob. "What's wrong?"

"N-nothing," the First Investigator asserted. "Are you back already?"

"Yeah, sure, but why did you scream?"

"It was just a dream," Jupiter said.

"Must have been a pretty bad nightmare."

"That's right. Oh, all these strange incidents are driving me completely crazy!" He grinned and waved it off as if annoyed with himself.

In reality, he was worried. Why was he dreaming about his parents? Was it really just all the mysterious events here in Ruxton? Or had he been unconsciously thinking about his parents because the whole story had something to do with Bob's father? Was there some mystery in Mr Andrews's past that they had stumbled onto, almost by accident? Yes, that had to be it. That was logical. All just a few crazy capers of his subconscious.

"Did you find out anything?" he asked Bob to distract himself from what was bothering him.

Bob finally came into the room and closed the door behind him. "You bet! I now know what the Teumessian fox is!"

8. The Student's Den

If Jupiter had needed anything else to shake off sleep for good, it was news like this. “How did you find out so quickly?”

Bob grinned. “Records and research—Bob Andrews,” he quoted his entry on The Three Investigators’ business card. “But seriously, it was totally simple. The Teumessian fox is, I’m afraid, unrelated to Ruxton or any of the mysteries of this university.”

“No?” asked Jupiter disappointedly.

“Well, sort of, I guess.” Bob shrugged his shoulders. “Just you wait and see. The Teumessian fox is a character from Greek mythology!”

Bob shuffled over to the tiny desk that stood below the equally tiny window. He sat down on the old wooden chair in front of it. “He is a huge man-eating beast sent by the gods to punish the city of Thebes for a crime the people there had committed. The Teumessian fox got its name because it was first seen near Teumessus, a village in Thebes. According to legend, the fox wreaked havoc and killed many people. The only way to appease him was to make a sacrifice to him every month.” Bob paused in his story.

“What’s wrong?” asked Jupiter.

“Oh, I was just thinking about the strange animal howls I heard.”

“Like from a... fox?” Jupe speculated.

“I don’t know!” Bob tried to grin, but failed miserably. “And if they did, they certainly didn’t come from the Teumessian fox. He’s just a mythical creature. But anyway, the gods have blessed this animal with a special gift—he was destined never to be caught.”

“Interesting,” Jupiter commented. “A fox that could never be caught.”

“That’s not all,” Bob continued. “So, the people failed in all attempts to capture the fox. Eventually, they engaged a giant hunting dog—a hound by the name of Laelaps. Interestingly, this hound also had a special gift—he was destined to catch whatever he hunted. The two fought an eternal duel—the Teumessian fox that could never be caught... against the Laelaps, the hound that could catch anything!”

“Two forces that cancel each other out,” Jupe added. “It’s an inevitable contradiction due to the paradoxical nature of their mutually excluding abilities. There will be no winner in such a confrontation.”

“Exactly! That’s why the supreme god Zeus intervened and put an end to the quarrel by turning both animals to stone.”

“To stone,” Jupiter repeated thoughtfully. “Maybe that’s the solution! Do statues of these legendary figures exist here on the university grounds?”

“Hmm...” grumbled Bob. “I don’t know. But what would statues have to do with the strange happenings? And with my father? No, Jupe, I think you’re barking up the wrong tree.”

“Wait and see! Something is rotten here...”

“In the meantime, have you heard anything from Pete?”

Jupiter shook his head. “He seems extremely comfortable with that Samantha.”

“As long as they don’t have to run away from man-eating foxes or mysterious hunting dogs while jogging...”

“You sound like Pete. They’re mythical creatures... and whatever happens, we certainly won’t be facing them!”

“Oh, you know, we’ve seen dancing devils, wandering cave men and green ghosts, how would that be different from...”

“Well?” interrupted the First Investigator. “If I remember correctly, and I don’t doubt it...” He did not finish the sentence because Pete came in. “Speaking of devils, here comes one...”

Bob grinned and turned to the Second Investigator. “You look pretty out of breath.”

“Samantha can outrun me.”

This made Bob grin even wider. “Oh yeah?”

“She is super fit! She outran me and lasted longer than I did.”

“And I suppose you are offended, huh?” asked the First Investigator. “After all, the most athletic of The Three Investigators would not be able to let that go!”

As he said it, it struck him that he also felt the same way, only towards a different person. When it came to logical thinking and the ability to draw accurate conclusions, Jupiter had always been the best—and now the obnoxious TJ alias Taylor-Jackson, of all people, was outshining him!

Pete turned around. “I have to go to the kitchenette and get a drink. Are you coming?” He left the room.

His two friends followed him. Their annoying housemate was standing in front of the fridge and was taking out a bottle with an indefinable yellowish-cloudy content where some threads were drifting and bound together in a horrible-looking mesh.

With that, Taylor-Jackson went to the table. As he poured the bottle content into a cup, some of the strange mass plopped out.

“What are you looking at? This is mushroom tea. Totally healthy! It stimulates the body and mind. It’s just an infusion of mushrooms in water, made by using edible mushrooms.” He drank the glass empty. “It’s good to have after a day like this!”

Jupe found it disgusting, but refrained from commenting.

“Didn’t it go well in your class?” asked Pete, who also grabbed a bottle from the fridge—but clear water.

Taylor-Jackson looked Jupiter right in the eye. “Quite the opposite. Everything went fine there. But after that—”

“What happened?” The First Investigator overcame his disapproval of their housemate. Apparently TJ had experienced something strange too. Not that there was a shortage of mysterious incidents, but the more pieces of the puzzle that turned up, the greater the chance that it would all fit together into a complete picture.

“Drugs,” Taylor-Jackson said. “Just imagine, some idiot offered me drugs!”

“That’s bad,” Pete admitted.

“I told that guy to get lost!” said the housemate of The Three Investigators, who immediately seemed a little more sympathetic. However, he immediately undid this good impression by pointing at Jupiter. “Maybe that would be something for you, but I—”

“For one thing,” the First Investigator interrupted impassively, “I stay away from drugs as much as you do and as much as anyone in their right mind does... and for another, TJ, tell me did this occur.”

All of a sudden, the boy looked as if Jupiter had punched him. The corners of his mouth dropped and an angry glint entered his eyes. “What did you just call me? It’s possible I didn’t hear you properly—the way you talk so pompously!”

“Sorry, it slipped out,” said the leader of The Three Investigators without any regret. Anyone who sassed him had to expect a tit-for-tat response. “Please, Taylor-Jackson, where was that and when?”

“Why? Are you going to try to buy something else?”

“On the contrary,” the First Investigator assured him. “I want to check on this drug pedlar.”

“Why is this any of your business?”

That was a fair question, though. For a moment, Jupiter considered telling TJ about their detective business, but decided against it. It would probably only have led to more mocking remarks.

Bob came to his rescue. “I’m taking a journalism class and this would be a great topic for a report. ‘Drug trafficking in Ruxton’, that has a nice ring to it.”

TJ wrinkled his nose. “If you can find a better headline, that could be something. All right—it was about twenty minutes ago in the Student’s Den under the cafeteria.”

“Where?” gasped Juve and Bob at the same time. What kind of a strange name was that?

“You mean in that party room?” asked Pete. “The student bar?”

“Exactly. The guy had quite long brown hair and was wearing leather trousers. You can’t miss him.”

“Quite long?” repeated Bob. “What does that mean?”

“Pretty long, for a guy,” explained Taylor-Jackson, who himself had a stubble-short hairstyle.

“Come on!” said Jupiter to his friends. “Let’s go.”

Pete quickly drank a glass of water and disappeared into the bathroom for a minute while the others said a curt goodbye to their housemate. Taylor-Jackson returned to his mushroom tea.

In the stairwell they were silent, only outside Bob asked: “How do you know about this ‘Student’s Dump’?”

“Student’s Den,” the Second Investigator corrected him and moved on quickly. “I was there with Samantha.”

“I thought you were—”

“—Jogging, yes.” He grinned. “Before that, we had to meet somewhere before we started running. It’s nice... like a bar, only without alcohol, so everyone’s allowed in... including us.”

“The ideal place to deal drugs,” Jupiter said dryly. “When TJ mentioned it, something immediately struck me.”

“Which is?” asked Bob.

“Well, Pete’s experience, of course! The female students who moved so strangely and rigidly in his class! Maybe they were under the influence of drugs.”

“You think so?”

“It’s too early to tell,” Jupiter clarified. “It is merely a theory that we should investigate. As investigators, we have to believe everything is possible as long as we can’t prove otherwise.”

“Now that you mention it,” Pete said, dumbfounded, “I remembered something! One of the students, I think her name was Anne, gave out birthday muffins. Terribly dry things and they smelled very strange.”

Bob let his hands disappear into his trouser pocket. “You mean she might have put drugs in there?”

“Could be, couldn’t it?” Pete looked around to make sure no one was walking close enough behind them to overhear. But they were still alone. Only a few birds were sitting on the branches of a bush.

“That would explain Samantha’s strange behaviour when she came back after lunch,” Pete continued. “Remember? She was suddenly a different person for a few minutes. Before that she had eaten half of her muffin! Couldn’t it be that afterwards she was... well, high... or stoned—only she didn’t know that.”

“What about you? Have you had a bite?” asked Bob.

“Fortunately, no! The hideous thing is in my pocket intact.”

“Very good,” Jupiter said. “Then we can investigate it later. I have a feeling there’s something to this drug thing.”

“And if—” The Second Investigator interrupted himself and shook his head. “Oh, nonsense.”

“What?” asked Bob.

“And what if we ourselves were also under the influence of drugs? Because we inhaled something or other? Maybe it was imagination that the birds were in the air, Juve... and the strange animal howls, Bob, you didn’t actually hear them because they didn’t exist!”

“Fair enough,” Jupiter said, “but that doesn’t explain the matter of Bob’s father and the Teumessian fox.”

They walked on and soon the building of the main cafeteria appeared in front of them. It was a square concrete building that was as old as it was ugly. The windows were bordered with bright red paint, which at least offered some variety.

Pete led them around the building to the back. There they went down a steep, staircase to the basement. A small arrow was painted on the wall. In it was only two words: ‘Student’s Den’.

“It seems to have been aptly named,” Jupiter remarked as he reached a metal door at the bottom of the staircase.

Inside, rock music was playing, just loud enough for people to still have a conversation. A large bar took up the wall opposite the door, otherwise there were about a dozen tables. Most of them were occupied.

The First Investigator did not have to look around for long to find what he was looking for. The man might be about twenty years old. His light brown hair was shiny with gel. He was standing at the bar and in his leather trousers, he was indeed an unmissable presence.

So that was him—the guy who had wanted to sell drugs to TJ!

9. Alpha Lambda Chi

The First Investigator kept an unobtrusive eye on Mr Leatherpants, as he called him. Of course, The Three Investigators couldn't just jump right in. First they wanted to observe him.

They went to the bar and ordered something to drink. Pete and Bob took a Coke, while Jupiter followed the recommendation written on a mirror and chose a shake from several fruit juices. It was advertised as a cool vitamin bomb.

Most of the visitors in the Student's Den were huddled in groups at tables, talking and laughing. In one corner, a young woman with a striking vulture nose sat in front of a laptop and typed.

Now that they were in the middle of the room, they realized that the music was playing louder than they were comfortable with. The man in the leather trousers was standing barely three metres away next to two students who were discussing some old American authors The Three Investigators had never heard of. The two were probably studying literary history.

A waitress, surely a student herself, placed the glasses in front of the boys. Jupiter's special juice looked wonderful and tasted delicious, as he realized shortly afterwards. Half a slice of orange and some pineapple were stuck on the sugared rim of the glass.

The Three Investigators conversed in whispers. They wanted to keep an eye on the suspected drug pedlar for the time being, but not wanting to wait too long. After all, there was always the danger that he would leave the Student's Den and they would have no way of making contact in an inconspicuous manner.

But how should they proceed? Just ask him about the drugs? Chance came to their aid when the two literature students paid and left their place at the bar. Now no one stood between The Three Investigators and the man any more.

"I have an idea," Pete whispered to his friends.

"What?" Bob wondered.

"Just play along!" The Second Investigator waited until the waitress looked over and beckoned to her. She came over to him. Pete ordered a beer.

The waitress looked at him with slightly narrowed eyes. "Well, first of all, you're certainly too young for that and secondly..."

"I'm not," Pete objected.

"He's not," agreed Jupiter, who immediately saw through what Pete was up to. "... And neither am I."

"And secondly," the waitress calmly continued, "there is no alcohol here."

"But—" Jupiter objected.

"No buts! You're welcome to leave if you want to cause trouble."

"We don't," Bob assured him. "We'll leave anyway. It's so boring without any alcohol! Can we pay, please?"

"Sure." She named the sum and the boys rummaged in their wallets.

Silently, the First Investigator was pleased with Pete's idea and that Bob also played along so perfectly. Although they had to improvise, their performance was not bad. If Mr Leatherpants was indeed selling drugs to potential buyers, The Three Investigators had recommended themselves as customers more than anyone else in the room.

The only problem was that Mr Leatherpants didn't react at all, but just grinned tiredly and put a few coins on the table. He left the student bar even before The Three Investigators.

The next moment, Jupiter, Pete and Bob also got up to leave, and the First Investigator whispered: "After him?" and his friends nodded. Hopefully they managed to track him inconspicuously.

... But they didn't have to. Mr Leatherpants was waiting for them at the top of the staircase that led up from the basement. He was leaning against the wall in the semi-dusk and grinning at them. It was just before nine o'clock in the evening, the sun had long since set and the nearest street lamp was some distance away among the trees. No one else was in the vicinity.

"You still have to practise," said Mr Leatherpants.

"What do you mean?" asked Pete innocently.

"Well, your beer act. You look far too young, and you should have realized that there's no alcohol down there at all."

"Maybe," said the Second Investigator, seemingly sullenly. "What's it to you?"

"I have something better for you." Mr Leatherpants held out his closed hand. Around his wrist fluttered a leather band with strange signs on it.

Jupiter took a step closer to get a better look, but he didn't really recognize it. Were there three characters?

"Something better?" Bob asked, snapping Jupiter out of his thoughts. "And what would that be?"

Mr Leatherpants opened his fist and the leather band slipped. At that instant, Jupiter could see the imprint more closely... and he recognized them. Indeed, there were three characters—three Greek characters. They were 'ΑΛΧ'—'Alpha Lambda Chi'.

Only then did Jupiter notice what was in Mr Leatherpants's hand—a sachet with a white powder. So Taylor-Jackson was right. Mr Leatherpants was indeed dealing drugs.

"What's that?" asked Pete. "Coke?"

"Quiet!" hissed Mr Leatherpants. "Geez, don't you know better than to shout so loud!" Quickly he let the sachet disappear into his trouser pocket. "It's super quality. Because you're new here, you can have it for a great price. Well?"

Jupiter saw a good chance to bust this drug pedlar. He felt queasy, but he took up the offer and showed interest. "How much?" he asked as calmly as possible.

But everything turned out differently! Suddenly Samantha stormed up from nowhere!

"Are you crazy?" she screeched, glaring angrily at Pete. "What's this all about? Has student life gone to your heads or what?"

Pete turned to her. Before he could say anything, more accusations poured down on him. "I come along unsuspecting with Julie and then I see you here—"

"It's all right," Pete said. "It's—"

Jupiter did not hear what his friend said. Instead, he stared after Mr Leatherpants, who was rushing away.

"Great!" the First Investigator grumbled to himself. That had gone very wrong. It didn't help that Pete tried to straighten out the situation with Samantha.

"I'm glad we got away from Samantha," Bob said a little later. They were sitting on a bench about a hundred metres from the entrance to their dorm, directly under a lamp that created an island of warm, yellow brightness. Samantha had hurried off with Julie at some point, not without giving Pete, in particular, one last venomous look.

“But what good has all this action done us now?” Pete asked.

“Well, lots of them,” Jupiter said enthusiastically. “We have a lead!”

“Oh yeah?” Pete sighed. “So we know that guy sells some illegal drugs—so what?”

“Alpha Lambda Chi,” said the First Investigator.

“What?” asked the Second Investigator.

Bob grinned. “So you saw it too.”

Pete rolled his eyes. “Am I the only one who can’t understand your secret language?”

“Because you’re not observing closely enough,” Jupiter rebuked. “Alpha Lambda Chi is...”

“I know,” Pete interrupted. “Greek letters. Three in a sequence. So they probably stand for the name of a fraternity. You may be our mastermind, but I realize that too. But what makes you think of that now? I know more, by the way... they’re the first, eleventh and twenty-first letters in the Greek alphabet.”

“The twenty-second,” Jupe corrected him without hesitation. “Letters of the Greek alphabet are also used to represent numbers, for instance, alpha for ‘1’, lambda for ‘30’, and chi for ‘600’.”

“Great stuff, Jupe!” commented Pete, annoyed. “Do you have any more in store?”

“Sure. In physics, the lower-case lambda is the symbol for the wavelength, for example... but that’s not the point.”

“What Jupe is getting at in his own special way,” Bob said, “is that our no less special friend wears a leather band that has this string of letters on it.”

“And that means, just like you said, Pete, that Mr Leatherpants probably belongs to a fraternity of the same name.”

The Three Investigators decided to proceed to the library to check on the Alpha Lambda Chi fraternity on the Internet. Surprisingly, there was almost nothing to find there. All the fraternities of the university presented themselves on a page of the university, but in this particular case there was only the address to contact them, nothing else.

Jupiter pointed out that he had an idea where they could find out more.

“Oh yeah?” said Pete. “Who do you want to ask?”

“Someone who has been in Ruxton for a long time and gets everywhere thanks to his job. He was specifically recommended to us in the programme information as a contact person and I have already had a meeting with him. I’m sure he can tell us more about it.”

“You mean—”

“Exactly! Lemuel Garvine!”

Pete shook himself. “The crazy caretaker with his poison dart frogs? Well, this is going to be fun...”

10. The Fraternity Leader

The three of them made their way to Mr Garvine's house and thought of a strategy to ask him about the fraternity in the most inconspicuous way.

Jupiter, who was the only one who knew where the caretaker lived, led the way—but stopped abruptly when an eerie noise made him cringe. It was a bark and a growl!

"Bob! Did you hear that? Is it the same as what you heard—" Pete broke off in mid-word as something burst from between two bushes lying in the dark. A black, elongated body leapt onto the path, only a few steps in front of The Three Investigators!

The dog panted happily at them and wagged his bushy tail. He plodded closer, looking at the three boys out of wide eyes... until suddenly, without transition and without reason, he began to yelp wildly, growling, barking and baring his teeth.

Pete took a step back. The dog ran away. Relieved, The Three Investigators laughed.

"Before you ask again," Bob said, "no, that was definitely not what I've heard before. Earlier, it sounded much more sinister and I don't think it was a dog either. More like... oh, I don't know."

"Never mind," Jupiter said. "Let's go. It's not far now. I must say, though, that dog was acting very strangely, don't you think? What on earth was the matter with him?" He marched ahead with lunging steps.

Soon they came to the fenced-in house of Lemuel Garvine. However, the little garden gate in the fence was locked.

"We shouldn't disturb him this late," Pete suggested. "Let's come back tomorrow before classes start."

"There's still a light on in the house," Jupiter didn't want to give up that easily. "He's awake." The First Investigator pulled out his mobile phone and dialled the number that was on Garvine's name plate on the garden gate.

"Jupe, shall we really—" Pete began.

"Sure," Jupe interrupted him. "He put his mobile number on the name plate, so he's bound to turn off his mobile if he doesn't want to be disturbed. Otherwise some jokers will call all night and—Yes? Hello?" He waved off and spoke into the mobile now. "Yes, Mr Garvine, sorry to disturb you, this is Jupiter Jones. We spoke briefly today about the birds and your pets." He was silent, listening. "Yes, your frogs! Would you show them to my friends?" Again a little pause, then: "Great, thank you! Yes, we'll wait."

Satisfied, the First Investigator hung up. "It worked out wonderfully. Just as I suspected, he was thrilled that you are interested in poison dart frogs. We'll find some way to sneak in the question about Alpha Lambda Chi." He took a deep breath. He loved it when everything went according to plan, even if it was about little things.

It was not long before the front door opened and Mr Garvine came out to meet them. He unlocked the small garden gate. "Come on in. It's rare that anyone shows an interest in my favourite pets." He scratched his three-day beard. "After all, most people like boring animals like cats and dogs."

Shortly afterwards, they looked around the house. The wallpaper in the narrow hallway had a faded and rather ugly floral pattern. A staircase led upwards, a door branched off to the

side. Garvine climbed the steps in front of them to a heavy sliding door made of opaque, grained glass. Behind it was a large room, where a large part was taken up by three terrariums, including a portable one that Jupiter saw earlier in the garden.

The portable glass case with the lemon yellow poison dart frogs was not even the largest. In a gigantic terrarium, certainly well over two metres long, lay thick branches on which four jet-black lizards dozed lazily under the red light of a heat lamp. The third box was a bit smaller.

“Just look at everything,” Mr Garvine said kindly.

Pete went to one of the terrariums and saw some animals that looked like a cross between a frog and a lizard.

“Those are salamanders and they are amphibians,” the caretaker explained, and for the next few minutes, The Three Investigators listened patiently to a lecture about ‘these wonderful and amazing animals’, as Garvine pointed out several times.

Jupiter waited for an opportunity to change the subject and bring up what was of burning interest to him. “Mr Garvine,” he finally managed to address him, “you know your way around Ruxton.”

“I think so.”

“How long have you been working here?”

“Twenty years, I’m sure,” he said.

“Twenty years,” Bob repeated thoughtfully. He looked as if he wanted to say something else, but remained silent.

The First Investigator nodded. “I suppose you know every nook and cranny and all the staff at the university.”

“Not everyone who works here... definitely not! I never meet most of the librarians, secretaries and guest lecturers... but the actual university campus, I know it like the back of my hand. I think I’ve fixed something everywhere, from electrical sockets to toilet cisterns!”

Jupiter decided to rattle the caretaker by abruptly asking: “What does a fraternity called Alpha Lambda Chi tell you?”

The caretaker was startled—and began to laugh. “What do you want from them? This isn’t just any fraternity... in my opinion, they’re all nuts. But quite apart from that, they’re dangerous!”

“Dangerous?” Pete enquired. “What do you mean by that?”

Lemuel Garvine laughed. “Don’t be afraid! They’re certainly not as dangerous as my poison dart frogs.” He stood next to the terrarium with his favourites and put his hand on one of the frogs—the way other people pat their dog’s head or casually stroke their cat.

“I am not afraid,” Pete said, but his voice did not sound quite as convincing as he would have liked. “I’m just interested in what you mean by that.”

“Yes, tell us more,” Juve asked. “You say all the members of this fraternity are... crazy?”

“Well, I exaggerated a little,” the caretaker admitted. “They think they’re the best but they’re a bit weird... or cranky. They are an aloof and sinister fraternity that no one on the outside knows much about. That’s just where the rumours flourish. The head of Alpha Lambda Chi, the so-called master of ceremonies, never makes a public appearance.”

“What do you mean?” asked Bob in amazement.

“Personally, I don’t think he exists at all—like some kind of phantom, you know? He always lets himself be represented and everyone who belongs to the fraternity... well, it seems to me that they worship him.”

Jupiter pinched his lower lip. “That sounds more like a cult than a student fraternity to me.”

“They’re not religious or anything.” Lemuel Garvine waved off. “You have to experience it to understand it.”

“And you have experienced it?”

“Goodness no!” Garvine shook his head hastily. “I’ve only been in the room where they hold their meetings once because I had to fix a water pipe. It was quite tricky and that was enough for me. I didn’t meet Bernhard Egglesforth III on that occasion!”

“Bernhard... who?” Pete gasped.

“You heard right. Bernhard Egglesforth III—that’s the name of the leader of the fraternity.”

“The leader that doesn’t exist,” said the First Investigator.

“It’s just a guess on my part,” Garvine added.

Bob stifled a laugh. “Crazy name for a phantom. Too good to be real. Sounds like an old English nobleman.”

The caretaker nodded. “That’s what I meant about them all being a bit weird. They think they’re better than everyone else. Maybe they’re emulating their mysterious fraternity leader.”

“I thought you didn’t think he existed?” asked Pete, confused.

“But even if that’s true,” Jupiter said, “someone must have created the character and used him as a cover identity.”

All the while, Bob watched the lizards in the giant terrarium moving sluggishly. “I’m surprised the university tolerates this—some sinister student fraternity at Ruxton?”

“What should anyone do about it?” asked Lemuel Garvine. “It has nothing to do with the university administration and official business. It is a purely private matter. The fraternity’s meeting room is rented by the members as per normal.” He looked at his watch. “It is already late. I have to get up early tomorrow. Sorry, but I have to ask you to leave now...”

The Three Investigators said goodbye, not without emphasizing once again how interesting the poison dart frogs had been. In reality, the information about Alpha Lambda Chi was a thousand times more interesting...

As they were walking back to the dormitory, they discussed with each other for a while as to how they should proceed. Did it mean anything that the drug pedlar was a member of this sinister fraternity? It could just as well be pure coincidence. Was the fraternity really a crime nest? Was it also connected to all the other mysterious incidents?

Questions upon questions, but no answers. The short conversation with Mr Garvine has made The Three Investigators curious. At the moment, this fraternity represented the only lead worth pursuing. By the time they arrived in their dormitory, it was clear—the next day they would try to become members of Alpha Lambda Chi.

11. “Flee While You Can!”

“You want what?” exclaimed a blonde girl with an old-fashioned potted hairstyle. The ends of her hair, which reached just above her eyebrows, were lightened so that they looked almost white. She blew her nose noisily. On a chain close to her neck hung a pendant with the now familiar Greek letters—Alpha Lambda Chi.

A restless night and a short breakfast lay behind The Three Investigators. They had decided to directly approach the fraternity. The address of the fraternity’s meeting room mentioned by Mr Garvine was found on the Internet. This was exactly where the friends had gone at nine o’clock.

In an anteroom, they stood eye to eye with the blonde who was seated behind a small desk where she checked all the visitors. She was staring at them as if they were about to blow up the building.

“We want to apply for admission to Alpha Lambda Chi,” Jupiter repeated their request. “We have heard only the best about this fraternity and therefore—”

“That’s because,” the blonde interrupted gruffly, “we are the best. You can’t just become a member here like you do at a chess club! Who are you guys anyway?”

Pete cleared his throat. “We are one of the selected students from Rocky Beach High for the special programme...”

She sat down again. “High school students? You have no business here! We’re a university fraternity, get it?”

The Three Investigators were not going to be put off that easily. “It’s precisely because of our current special status that we make interesting candidates, don’t we?” said Jupiter in his typically complicated way. “That way we could get a special insight.”

“What part of ‘high school students have no business here’ don’t you understand?” the student asked.

“We are looking for the unusual,” the First Investigator persisted and began one of his infamous monologues. “The very fact that this mixed fraternity does not have exclusively male or female members makes it unusual. Alpha Lambda Chi is independent, not part of a larger association. Usually—”

“Are you done?” the student interrupted him.

Jupiter gasped for air. “No!”

“What he wanted to say was—” Pete began.

“Stay here,” the blonde interrupted, “and be glad I’m in a good mood. I’ll get someone for you to talk to.”

“Bernhard Egglesforth III?” asked Bob.

She looked at him as if he had just asked her about her most intimate secret. “Well, you have some nerve!”

She then walked a short distance to a door, opened it and went in. The Three Investigators couldn’t even get a glimpse inside as she closed the door so quickly. They gathered that it was the fraternity’s meeting room.

“It went quite well,” whispered Bob. “In principle, she’s right. As high school students, we really can’t expect to be accepted into a fraternity.”

But they weren't going to let that stop them. Jupiter in particular had been gripped by the ambition to argue until they could look behind the scenes of Alpha Lambda Chi in one way or another.

They did not have to wait long before the door opened again. However, it was not the blonde student who came out. It was a man who looked almost too old to still be a student. His full hair was black as night and as long as a finger. "Chris has told me all about you. I'm impressed by your tenacity. Who's the smart-ass?"

The First Investigator folded his arms and said: "I assume that means me. My name is Jupiter Jones... and with whom do I have the pleasure?"

"I am Gamma."

"Gamma?"

"That's all you need to know. I'm the one who decides if you can take the entrance test that make you a probationary member." He pointed an outstretched index finger at Jupiter. "That's never been done before, but I'm inclined to grant an exception."

"Three of us are applying," Bob clarified.

Gamma turned his head towards him. "You two failed."

"But we didn't even take a test yet!" Bob argued.

"Only your friend gets a chance, but he will soon wish otherwise," Gamma said. "For the two of you, Alpha Lambda Chi will not accept you. Get out of here!"

Jupiter nodded to his friends. "See you later."

Gamma waited until the two were outside, then said: "Do you know the slogan of our entrance test?"

"N-no." The First Investigator was annoyed at the tremor in his voice. He was determined not to show any weakness.

"Alpha Lambda Chi... Flee while you can!" Gamma grinned. "You still have a chance to go."

"I am not afraid."

"Good. Come along."

Jupiter looked at his watch. "My class starts soon."

"It's now or never."

"But—"

"It's now or never," the man repeated relentlessly.

Jupiter nodded. "Okay, now then."

Gamma grabbed him by the arm, yanked the door open and pushed him into the meeting room. Even as the First Investigator staggered and tried to regain his balance, he heard the door slam behind him.

Then someone approached him. It was a woman in the complete outfit of a fencer, dressed in a grey full-body suit. She wore a fencing mask with a close-meshed net in front of her face. In her hand, she held a long rapier.

"Come on!" shouted Gamma. "Pick up your weapon!"

Jupiter looked around. A step away from him lay a second rapier. "But... I can't—"

"Go!"

The First Investigator bent down and took the weapon. It was about a metre long. "You want me to fence?"

His opponent was already rushing towards him. The sword whistled through the air, almost stopping Jupiter's heart. The next moment there was a jerk, the weapon was flicked out of his hand and flew whirring away. It somersaulted before it hit the ground. By then he felt a pressure on his chest, heard a swish...

... And his T-shirt was slashed apart.

His opponent had cut it so skilfully that his skin had not been scratched!

"Pick it up," Gamma demanded. "Try again!"

"Do I have to beat her?" That was silly! His opponent was obviously very good at fencing, while he was a complete novice... or... not even anywhere near it... Not yet! Jupiter fumbled for his slashed shirt.

"Pick up the rapier and defend yourself or you're out!"

He did as he was told. His thoughts were racing. How could he defend himself? How could he pass this unexpected test?

Briefly he thought of his friends. Pete might have a chance, but Jupiter was nowhere near as athletic and agile! He stretched the rapier away from him, tried to get into a kind of defensive position.

The unknown opponent made a lunge and attacked. The weapons clanged. At least Jupiter held his ground this time... but only very briefly! The sword whizzed again—back and forth and forward again—and soon, parts of Jupiter's trousers were slashed to tatters! Then he felt a pain on his thighs. He looked down. There was a small cut in the skin and a few drops of blood.

The sight made him angry, apart from his destroyed trousers. He eyed his opponent closely. She bent slightly forward, leaning on her right leg. In a moment, she would attack again!

Jupiter took the opportunity. He dashed forward and kicked her hard on the leg. She fell. The rapier slipped from her hand and clattered to the floor. Jupiter waved the weapon in the air in front of him. "Now you listen to me! I need at least some preparation."

His opponent sat up. To his surprise, she laughed under the mesh and pulled off her mask. The blonde who had received him earlier emerged grinning.

Then Gamma said: "Great. You impress me. You show no fear—and at least you stood your ground. That little cut on your leg wouldn't normally be enough for a proper smack, but it's enough for your probationary membership."

The First Investigator felt over the wound. "A smack? What more do you do? A duelling scar? You got to be kidding!" Juve was referring to academic fencing rituals in which the candidate had to bear at least one permanent scar—on his face! This was practised in some fraternities in Europe around the 19th century but still existed today! This was getting stranger and stranger. "And do one of you fight in protective gear and the other one doesn't?" Juve asked.

"Nothing is normal with us!" Gamma grinned as the blonde took the two rapiers and left through another door at the back of the room.

"Am I a member now?" asked Jupiter.

"Certainly not. I will now present your case to our master."

"Bernhard Egglesforth III?"

"Exactly."

"Can I get to meet him?"

"Why would you want to do that?" asked Gamma.

"I'm just asking..."

"I suppose you want to know who he is. Why?"

"This eccentric name sounds like he can't be real at all. Besides, no one seems to know who he is. It's a mystery—and I love solving mysteries. I'm attracted to dealing with the unknown, with unanswered questions and the mysterious!"

"So you are curious." Gamma looked pleased. "That's good. I'll get back to you."

“Don’t you want to know where I live?” asked Jupiter.

Gamma turned around. “Do you doubt that I will find you?” With that, he opened the door that they came in from and ushered Jupe out.

Jupiter felt like a fool as he walked into the anteroom with his tattered clothes. Pete and Bob were no longer there. He looked at his watch. If he hurried, he could still change and be on time for the morning session of his psychology class.

His leg hurt, but he paid no attention to it. After this little altercation, he really wanted to look behind the scenes of Alpha Lambda Chi!

12. Crimes of All Kinds

The Second Investigator could hardly concentrate on the lesson. For one thing, he was not in the least interested in what Miss A.C. Berany with her silly straw hat was saying about the characteristics of a good poem. For another, he wondered how Jupiter had fared.

Together with Bob, he had decided earlier that they could not stand by their friend at the moment anyway. They had gone to their classes. Pete carried his phone in his pocket. It was set to vibrate, and he was waiting for a call from Jupe.

Samantha only said briefly that they had best forget the previous day's incident, then she acted completely normal towards him—if he wanted to call it normal that she adored him. Every now and then she moved a little closer to him. The cloud of perfume around her did not smell quite as intense as before. Pete wondered if it had something to do with his careful remark during their evening jog, which had been aimed in that direction?

"Remember yesterday, the first poem we heard," said A.C. "Pete Crenshaw, our guest from high school, gave us a short poem. In fact, it doesn't matter if it is a short poem. Through word play, sound, formal constraints, and aesthetics, a creative poem can engage the reader while effectively allowing the exploration of complex or unfamiliar topics.

"This is exactly the way you should go now. Give free rein to your creativity! Describe strong feelings, such as fear or freshly blossomed love, which you are not able to express with the existing linguistic possibilities!"

"Freshly blossomed love," Pete thought, wondering if it could get any worse.

"Now go on," the lecturer demanded. "I'll give you fifteen minutes. I'm curious!"

In view of the languishing look his seat neighbour was giving him, Pete had not the slightest desire to write a love poem. Perhaps he should focus on a different aspect—fear! That came noticeably closer to his current feelings.

Somehow he had to resist the advances, but he didn't want to offend Samantha either. After all, he actually liked her, and because she came from Rocky Beach High like he did, he automatically saw her as his ally during this special programme at Ruxton.

So the task was to be creative and write a few lines about fear. Darn, it was not easy at all! His mobile vibrated. He was much more interested in that than in writing a stupid poem! He scribbled something and stood up. A.C. looked at him questioningly.

"I have to go to the toilet," he explained.

"Remember your task!"

"Already done!" He looked at his composition again:

*Giant frogs are coming after me;
Freaking out, I know I have to flee;
Suddenly, they're getting really near;
C'mon, legs, get me out of here!*

That expressed strong fears and had a bit of creativity. Actually, it was total crap, but that didn't matter. He folded the paper and let it disappear into his trouser pocket.

Then he hurried out of the room, pulled out his mobile phone and looked. Jupiter had sent him a text message: 'Meet as soon as possible in my room.'

That aroused his curiosity all the more. How was he going to get through the rest of this terrible class?

What Bob would not have thought possible happened—he forgot about Jupiter and the fraternity. The journalism course captured him completely. Mr Roalstad brought up a subject that literally electrified Bob.

“Today we’re going to pretend,” the professor said, “that we’re on to something hot. A business game. Let’s say there are crimes that you have come across.”

A girl came forward and hesitantly took the floor. “Something actually happened to me. Not at my house, but here in Ruxton! My mobile phone. Well... it’s been stolen from me... only a short while ago. After a visit to the Student’s Den, it was suddenly gone. It was an expensive model.”

Roalstad nodded and looked around questioningly. “Anyone else?” he asked. His gaze wandered around the room, finally looking at Bob.

“For me it was my wallet,” said one boy. “I had fifty or sixty dollars in it because I was going to pick up some books at the front of the bookshop that day.”

More and more students came forward and reported similar incidents. Mr Roalstad took a deep breath. He suddenly looked nervous. “Suppose you wanted to write a report on this or on other crimes. How do you go about it?”

Bob couldn’t help but be amazed. Apparently there was not only drug dealing in Ruxton, but also a lot of thefts? And because no one had talked about it, everyone had believed it was an isolated incident. Was there no end to it? The closer one looked at this university, the more came to light.

It was hard to believe that just a few days ago he and Pete and Jupiter had been sitting in their headquarters, bored because they had no case to investigate. Their visit to Ruxton seemed to have turned into not just one case—but a whole bunch of cases! Or was it all connected? The thefts, at any rate, were another piece of the puzzle that didn’t quite fit in. Apparently, the whole picture was much bigger than The Three Investigators had imagined so far.

“So,” Mr Roalstad continued. “How do you go about being journalists?” He looked around the room. “Anyone?”

Bob raised his hand.

“Yes?”

“First of all, you would have to check all the facts. The more you know about a mysterious process, the easier it is to understand it. Every crime leaves traces that lead to the perpetrator.”

“Unless,” exclaimed the student seated next to Bob, “the lawbreaker erases these traces without a trace.”

“There is no such thing as the perfect crime,” Bob said with conviction. “Everything can be solved... sooner or later.”

Mr Roalstad seemed to enjoy this discussion. His nervousness disappeared. “Two opinions that have been around for a long time. Whole books have been written about them. What our young Mr Andrews holds, all honest citizens hope. You, on the other hand, Mr...” He raised his voice.

“Sanders,” said the student next to Bob.

“You, however, Mr Sanders, represent the hope of every criminal.” Low chuckles rolled through the room. “But seriously, a good reporter needs all the facts... and if he doesn’t have

them, he has to get them himself—on the spot. In that respect, a journalist is a kind of detective.” Roalstad looked at his watch. “That’s it for today. Don’t forget we don’t have an afternoon session so we won’t meet again until tomorrow.”

Everyone packed up. Before Bob could even stow his things, the professor was standing in front of him. “Come with me for a moment.” Bob followed him forward.

“You gave me your card yesterday, Bob,” the professor continued. “Normally I would not have given much attention to three investigators your age... but your father was a good man, so you got me thinking. I... I remembered your father because—” He broke off.

They were silent for a moment until Bob said: “My father is still a good man.” He thought of his dad lying to him when he said those words. It stung him.

“Sure,” said the lecturer.

“Mr Roalstad,” it suddenly burst out of Bob, “what do you know about the Teumessian fox?”

Mr Roalstad chewed on his lower lip. “You seem to have your ears all over the place and you’re a bright boy—just like your father.”

“What happened then?”

“I don’t know. Let it rest.”

“I can’t. What’s going on in Ruxton?”

Roalstad looked around hastily, as if he expected someone to be watching him. “There is an organization that has existed for several years.”

Bob thought. “A criminal organization like the Mafia? Don’t you think that’s a bit thick on—”

“A perfectly normal organization that everyone knows and which outwardly serves an innocuous purpose—an... association.”

Bob bristled. “You mean Alpha Lambda Chi.”

Mr Roalstad grinned. “I didn’t say that.”

“Why are you talking to me about this?”

“As a journalist, I am committed to the truth and to justice. Perhaps I have... forgotten that for too long.” It sounded as if he had actually wanted to say something else. “But when I saw you, I wondered—” He broke off again and held out a business card to Bob. “Take this and call me if you need any help. You know, there are rumours I can’t follow up and neither can the police. Moreover, I’m too old to be inconspicuous.”

“I understand... and you’ll be pleased to hear that The Three Investigators are already trying to do exactly what you imply—namely, infiltrating that sinister fraternity.”

Suddenly Bob wondered if he had made a mistake. What if Mr Roalstad had wanted to test him? What if he was connected to Alpha Lambda Chi and now knew his enemies were on to him?

“One more thing,” said the professor, “let bygones be bygones. The present offers more than enough problems.”

“I can’t promise you that.”

Roalstad nodded, slowly and deliberately. “I understand...” He gathered his things and walked out of the room.

Bob packed up the rest of his stuff, pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket and called home. He knew his father had a day off today. ‘Let bygones be bygones...’ He couldn’t.

It rang. Twice. Three times. “Yes?” It was his mother. “Bob, how are you? Are you all right?”

“Sure,” he claimed. “Can you put Dad on, please?”

“He’s not here,” she said. Why did he get the feeling she was lying?

Jupiter was about to open the door to the dormitory when a hand came up behind him and rested on his shoulder. He whirled around—and right in front of his face was Gamma, whose real name he still didn't know.

"You are lucky," Gamma said. "I'm going to give you a task. If you complete it, you will be given a special temporary membership with us for the duration of your stay in Ruxton."

"It's that quick?"

"Normally not. But the situation is not normal either. I know your file by now—your application and your CV. You live in a salvage yard. Sounds interesting."

"How did you get..."

"I have my ways," Gamma interrupted. "You seem to forget that we are the best."

"Certainly not." Jupiter grinned. "That's why I want to join you guys. So what do I have to do?"

"Very simple. The task is tailor-made for you. You have to steal something from someone and remain undetected."

"W-what?" The First Investigator could hardly believe it. "Are you serious?"

The very idea repulsed him deeply. He was an investigator—he didn't commit crimes, he solved them and made sure the guilty got their punishment! What Gamma was asking for went against everything Jupiter believed in.

"You will like it," Gamma continued, "because your victim is not just anyone. He doesn't deserve any better, I'm sure you'll agree."

"Who?" The First Investigator already guessed the answer... and he was not mistaken.

"Taylor-Jackson," Gamma said.

13. Egglesforth Doesn't Exist

Bob went back to the dormitory. His two friends were already waiting for him in Pete's room.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Bob. "Especially you, Jupe, you look like the entrance test didn't do you any good at all!"

"The fencing, yes." Jupiter sat on the bed and casually ran his hand over his leg at these words. "I did well on that, but—"

"Fencing?" asked Bob. "They made you—"

"Just you wait," Pete interrupted. He sat in the chair in front of the tiny desk. "It gets better."

The First Investigator cleared his throat audibly. "Are you going to let me finish or are you going to tell the story?"

The Second Investigator rolled his eyes. "That's all right. Don't be so irritable."

"Somehow it's all getting on my nerves," said Jupiter. "I don't know what to do and I don't like it at all. I've already told Pete—Gamma has contacted me again, Bob. This time with a task I have to complete in order to be accepted into Alpha Lambda Chi."

"Then just get it done," Bob said. "We'll help you."

"It's not that simple." The First Investigator turned sideways in his seat and dropped backwards onto the mattress. "I have to steal something from TJ."

"W-what?"

"Yes, that was exactly my reaction," Jupiter stated.

"They can't make you commit a crime!"

"They can ask me to do anything if I want to join them," the First Investigator countered. "The only question is whether it is worth it."

Pete shook his head. "Wrong! The right question is—do you want to play? I didn't want to sit in on that stupid poetry class either, but apparently I'm pretty good at it. Maybe you have a talent as a thief. Who knows?"

"That's a totally different thing," Jupiter said, audibly annoyed.

"Do it for our case," the Second Investigator pleaded. "Understand—we have to look behind the scenes of Alpha Lambda Chi, no matter what."

"As far as that is concerned, I can tell you quite a bit," Bob announced. "It fits in perfectly with the fact that they are asking a potential new member to commit a crime of all things." He recalled the stories of thefts brought up during Mr Roalstad's journalism class.

Jupiter pinched his lower lip, as he always did when he was thinking and deducing sharply. "It looks to me like this obscure fraternity is just a cover for some kind of... a crime ring. And you know what?"

"What?" Pete asked.

The First Investigator sat up and swung his legs out of bed. All at once he radiated grim determination. "Taylor-Jackson deserves a lesson! He is arrogant and obnoxious. Besides, I'll explain everything to him and apologize to him—at the latest when we leave Ruxton."

"Do you think he will accept your apology?"

The First Investigator waved off. "I don't care."

"Jupe?" asked Pete.

“What?”

“I don’t know you like that.”

Jupiter just grinned and stood up. “At the moment, I’m just wondering how best to go about it.”

Pete rose. “I’ll help you.”

“No,” the First Investigator decided categorically. “We have to be fair! That’s my job, not yours. Besides, I am convinced that Gamma is watching me. No one must help me or they might not take me in.”

“And I,” said Bob, “will do some research in the meantime! Mr Garvine thinks that this Bernhard Eggesforth III doesn’t exist... but I am not convinced that easily!”

Bob said goodbye to his friends and made his way to the caretaker to ask him some questions. But Garvine was not at home and he did not respond to a call to his mobile number.

The next path led Bob to the university library, where he searched the catalogue for the keyword ‘Alpha Lambda Chi’. However, he did not get a single meaningful hit, just as he did not get one with a search for ‘Bernhard Eggesforth III’. This did not surprise him.

Then he entered just the surname ‘Eggesforth’ in the library catalogue system. The main library in Ruxton had a book about statecraft in England by a certain James Eggesforth. There was certainly no connection, especially when the work was written almost two hundred years old.

Bob logged out of the catalogue and then searched the Internet intensively for more than two hours for further clues about the fraternity or its mysterious leader. He skimmed through dozens of articles on Ruxton and tore through several blogs by students recounting their experiences with various fraternities. No one wrote about Alpha Lambda Chi, except for one student who called herself ‘Alex A.’ She mentioned that she had been rejected there.

Bob contacted her via her personal website and asked in an email if she knew Bernhard Eggesforth personally. He did not give himself high hopes.

His head was buzzing when he wanted to give up the research for now and realized to his surprise that he had already received a reply from ‘Alex A.’. Hastily, he clicked on the message.

“Eggesforth doesn’t exist,” she wrote. “It’s a cover name. I tried to find out who he was. No chance. Was three years ago, so must be an older student by now. Regards, AA.”

Bob replied with a curt ‘thank you’, although Alex’s message didn’t help him. There had to be someone who knew more about Alpha Lambda Chi.

Of course!

How could he have been so stupid! Alpha Lambda Chi was not the only fraternity in Ruxton. Wasn’t it obvious to simply ask members of the other fraternities?

Immediately the exhaustion fell away from Bob. He set to work with fervour.

14. Jupiter Jones the Thief

Jupiter found a solution to his dilemma that was so obvious he wondered why he hadn't thought of it in the first place. Robbing TJ, of all people, was... simple.

Taylor-Jackson's room was only a few steps away. Although the Second Investigator was considered the expert lock-picker of The Three Investigators, Jupiter could still do everything on his own.

He waited until Pete went to the toilet. Immediately Jupiter hurried into his friend's room, tore open the cupboard and opened their detective case. As he had hoped, he immediately found the lock pick set in the compartment with their special equipment.

So that's how far it had come, it went through his head—stealing from Pete. That was crazy—but he was not allowed to let anyone in on his plan. He had to accomplish the task completely without anyone's help!

Jupiter hurried back to the kitchenette. Pete arrived a few seconds after him, grabbed his folder and went off to attend the afternoon session of his poetry class. Unlike his friends, Pete could not afford an afternoon off. Of course, he locked his room before he left. Between themselves, they wouldn't think of securing themselves like that, but after all, there was TJ. That's why they always locked up before leaving the dormitory.

The First Investigator hesitated as his plan was risky. He did not know when TJ would return. Too much was at stake. If he was caught, not only his housemate would turn him in but that would also be the end of the infiltration of Alpha Lambda Chi. In addition, he could also be expelled from the special programme.

The First Investigator was playing with the lock pick set in his trouser pocket. And now what? He had to think! Just sitting around was out of the question. He would rather get some air.

He went outside and kept a constant eye on the entrance to the dormitory. He couldn't miss TJ returning. Then he had to engage him in conversation and find out what he was planning for the rest of the day.

At lunchtime, there was surprisingly little activity around the dormitory. Almost all the students and lecturers were either at their classes or in the cafeteria. Jupiter only noticed this when he suddenly heard rustling and cracking from the bushes. He looked around but saw nothing in particular. He turned his gaze. Many cars were parked in the square in front of the dormitory. And... wasn't something moving there? Very close to Pete's car? A dark figure?

Jupiter wanted to look carefully, but he could no longer see the figure. Had he only imagined it?

Then he heard something behind him.

Footsteps!

He whirled around, but there was no one there. Slowly, he walked towards the entrance of the dormitory. He faltered, looked around—and a dark shadow whistled towards him!

Someone tried to hit him in the head with a thick branch! The First Investigator let himself fall. The branch whizzed past him. Jupiter rolled to the side. With his heart hammering wildly, he called for help, but he only saw the attacker running away. The figure

wore a cap pulled low over his head and a dark coat. Jupiter ran after him, but he lost the trail. The stranger was too fast and just disappeared.

Jupiter only noticed that his hands were shaking when he went back to the dormitory. Why had someone attacked him?

Once in his room, the First Investigator dropped onto the bed. Did anyone feel threatened by The Three Investigators?

He heard the door in the hallway slam shut and looked. Taylor-Jackson walked past him to his room without a word.

"Hey," Jupiter called out to him.

"What is it?"

"Did you also hear outside how—"

"Leave me alone," TJ snapped at him.

"What's wrong with you?"

"And since when are we friends that I should tell you anything?" Taylor-Jackson ducked into his room, but came out seconds later, carrying a bag under his arm. "I'm going out now."

Perfect! "Where to?" Jupe asked.

"Appointment," growled TJ. "Don't wait for me!"

"I wouldn't want to."

"Oh yeah? You got something better to do, huh? Do you have some chick who adores you, like your friend?"

"You mean Pete and Saman—"

"I'll give you a free tip," Taylor-Jackson interrupted, "on how to get rid of all the girls if they bug you... guaranteed!"

"How?" asked Jupiter, who wasn't interested at all. He just wanted to finally get the theft over with.

His housemate grinned broadly. "Just be yourself!" Laughing, he pulled away.

The First Investigator waited a few minutes and went to work with the lock picks. Although he had less experience compared to Pete, the door to Taylor-Jackson's room burst open after a few seconds.

A guilty conscience plagued him, but he told himself that he would give the things back to TJ later and apologize.

He looked around the strange room. He kept listening to see if TJ was coming back. His gaze fell on the digital camera lying on the desk. It was the perfect item to steal!

Jupe grabbed it and opened the window so that later, it would look as if TJ had left it open and the burglar had entered from the outside. After all, their apartment was low enough that a somewhat skilled climber could easily gain entry.

He pressed the lock button and left the room.

Jupiter Jones the thief, he thought. So it was as simple as that but he was only doing it to solve a whole series of crimes! He would make everything right later! Nevertheless, a guilty conscience weighed on him as he walked out of the dormitory shortly afterwards. He wanted to go to the Alpha Lambda Chi meeting room and ask for Gamma there.

He did not get that far. Seemingly out from nowhere, Gamma appeared and intercepted him.

"So?" Gamma asked. "Did you complete your task?"

Jupiter nodded.

"How did you do it?"

"I broke into Taylor-Jackson's room."

"Show me the booty."

The First Investigator took the camera out of his pocket.

Gamma held out his hand. "Give it to me."

"But—"

"What did you think? That you should keep the stolen item? Of course you have to turn it in!"

Jupiter hesitated briefly before handing him the camera. He could only hope that he would somehow get it back later to return it. Just as he handed it to Gamma, something flashed.

He turned around. Someone was standing nearby between two trees—and had photographed the handover!

"Just to be sure," Gamma said with a grin. "So we can remember what you did later."

"And so you can blackmail me?"

"Come on—we're colleagues now! You're one of us!"

"Does that mean—"

"You are admitted. There will be a meeting soon. There I will introduce you to the others. Congratulations, you have won against your competitor."

"My competitor?" he asked, confused.

Gamma slapped him amicably on the shoulders. "Oh yes, I guess I forgot to tell you. Taylor-Jackson applied to us too. I gave him the same assignment as you."

"You mean... he... he would have stolen something from me—just like I did to him?"

"And he wanted to take a much more radical approach than you," Gamma said.

The attack outside the dormitory! That had been TJ! So that's why his housemate had arrived in such a bad mood. Jupiter couldn't believe it and felt grim satisfaction at the same time. He didn't know what to think.

Gamma, on the other hand, looked all-round pleased. "Only one of you could win. Again, congratulations. Now come along."

"But that also means that Taylor-Jackson knows exactly that I stole from him. What if he reports me?"

"Don't worry. I will make it clear to him that he must keep his mouth shut. You're not alone now, Jupiter—we at Alpha Lambda Chi stick together. Your competitor won't say anything or he's as good as done!"

15. The Master of Ceremonies

They reached the tiny anteroom in front of the fraternity's meeting room. This time Jupiter went on unimpeded by Gamma's side. As he entered, he immediately remembered the bizarre fencing match, and as soon as he thought of it, the small wound on his thigh began to hurt.

However, there were enough distractions. A lot of people were in the room—twenty or more. Their chairs were all facing the same direction. Everyone was looking towards the second door, which was illuminated with a strange purple light. Some of the people were humming muffled sounds to themselves... or were they chanting a single, drawn-out word?

Gamma led the First Investigator to two empty seats. As soon as Jupe was seated, someone he knew only too well turned to him—the blonde student who had first ticked him off and then subsequently fought him in the fencing duel.

"No offence," she said, "you've done well. I don't recall ever seeing an aspirant join our midst as quickly as you did."

"There are special circumstances," Gamma said with a grin. "If we had let him hang around for a few weeks, he would have been gone by then."

Jupe waited anxiously to see what would happen next. All around, some people continued to intonate the muffled sounds. Everyone seemed to be waiting for something—or someone. And exactly this expectation was fulfilled in the next moment. The rear door opened and someone entered. At the same time, a second purple spotlight came on and illuminated the newcomer.

The First Investigator felt as if he were in a weird movie. The newcomer was relatively tall—Jupe estimated him to be about 1.9 metres. A black cloak hung from the person's shoulders to the floor and completely enclosed his body. All that was missing to create the perfect Dracula was a blood-red collar and long vampire fangs—but no part of the face was visible. The person wore a wooden mask that showed a fox face with red fur painted on it.

A fox! Jupiter felt his excitement take hold of him. This could only mean one thing! Had he found the Teumessian fox? And was it the mysterious Bernard Egglesforth III? Hadn't the caretaker, Lemuel Garvine, referred to him as the master of ceremonies? That fitted in perfectly with this strange appearance. Jupiter had never heard of such a strange appearance at any fraternity.

The crowd was in complete silence as the masked person went up to the lectern. This had to be the master of ceremonies. After a brief moment, he uttered: "Alpha..."

"Lambda," the crowd replied before the masked man finished with a 'Chi' and greeted those present.

"I don't even want to say much today!" The voice sounded muffled and distorted under the wooden mask. "The semester has begun. We can once again prove our special cohesion. Here's to a successful time!"

Applause broke out and Gamma took the floor. "I have brought a new member with me," he exclaimed. "Jupiter is not yet a student at Ruxton and is therefore only a guest. He passed the entrance test with flying colours."

Now all heads turned to the First Investigator, who felt the blush rise to his face. He could do little with this whole show.

“Welcome,” the masked man said graciously.

“Mr Egglesforth?” Jupiter called out foolhardily, not at all impressed by the masquerade. “I want to talk to you!”

Some began to laugh. The masked man, however, replied: “All in good time!” Then he turned around and proceeded to leave the room. Jupiter almost ran after him, but he had to pull himself together!

No sooner had the masked man left than the formal order of the meeting quickly disintegrated. Chairs jolted back and forth, creaking and squeaking loudly. Everywhere the members of Alpha Lambda Chi chatted with each other. The atmosphere suddenly seemed completely informal. Everyone seemed to be in high spirits. In some places, beer bottles were making the rounds. Jupiter was glad that no one was holding one out to him. He wondered if he could somehow follow the master of ceremonies. Only... how was he supposed to leave the room inconspicuously, moreover through the door that the obviously revered master of ceremonies had taken?

Gamma pressed a leather band with the three Greek letters into his hand—exactly like the one the drug pedlar had worn.

“Well, well, well, I know you,” he heard, as if on cue, Mr Leatherpants’s voice behind him at that moment. “You’ve got a lot of nerve showing up here!”

Bob marched criss-cross through the university grounds and tried to talk to representatives of the other student fraternities. But either he couldn’t reach anyone or the contacts couldn’t help him... or they didn’t want to. No one knew any more about the ominous Bernhard Egglesforth III. Bob meanwhile believed, just like the caretaker, that it was a purely imaginary figure.

At some point, he made his way back to the dormitory, as exhausted as he was frustrated. There was no one in their apartment. He tried to reach Jupiter by mobile phone, but immediately the voice mail jumped up. Pete was still in his poetry class. Bob’s least regret was that Taylor-Jackson was not around.

He decided to check out another open question of the mysterious case. It was still unclear whether the muffins from Pete’s class actually contained drugs. But as usual, the Second Investigator’s room was locked.

Until his friend returned, Bob wanted to make some preparations. Mr Roalstad’s business card was still in his pocket. The journalism professor had offered him that he could call if he needed help with his investigation. Why shouldn’t he do just that? He had to trust someone and Mr Roalstad seemed to have earned that. After all, he had openly stated that things were not right in Ruxton. Secretly, Bob hoped to learn something more about the past and thus about his father. More than anything else, he was preoccupied with the question of why his dad lied to him and what the Teumessian fox was all about.

He dialled the mobile number on the business card. “Yes?” he heard after the first ring.

“Bob Andrews here. Sir, you—”

“What can I do for you? I hope you haven’t done anything foolish. Remember what I told you about the past.”

“That I should let it rest, yes. That’s not what I’m calling about.” At least not only that, he thought, but he didn’t say it. “My friend is looking into Alpha Lambda Chi. I’m investigating on another front. You must have a lot of connections in Ruxton.”

“Indeed.”

“If I bring you a muffin, can you arrange for it to be chemically tested?”

Roalstad hesitated briefly and proved with his next words that he was good at thinking. "You are investigating drug trafficking and want to know if drugs have been processed in it?"

"Exactly."

"I can find that out quickly. When can we meet?"

"I still have to wait for my friend. I'll call you, okay? In an hour, at the latest." They said goodbye. Bob sat as if on pins and needles.

When Pete finally appeared, they went straight to his room. The muffin still lay untouched in the cupboard. When the Second Investigator took it out, he was surprised.

"What's wrong?" asked Bob.

"Our detective case! Bob, someone opened the case!"

"I don't believe it. You're wrong..."

"I am not mistaken! A burglar has rifled through our secret equipment. Wait!" He looked at them more closely. "My lock picks! Bob, someone stole my lock picks and the others—" The Second Investigator broke off in mid-sentence. "Jupe!" he exclaimed.

Bob no longer understood anything. "What about him?"

"Jupe took the lock picks to break into TJ's room!" Pete grinned all over his face. "I can't help but be impressed by that. Not only is he breaking into TJ's room, but he broke into my room first."

"That doesn't seem to shock you."

"Why should it? A special case just requires special means. I'm just surprised. So I believe he has completed his last task."

Pete tried to call Jupiter but there was no answer. "Where can he be?"

"Wherever he is, we can only hope he remains inconspicuous and no one notices what he's actually doing there," Bob said. "Those Alpha Lambda thingies don't seem to be joking around."

Pete handed Bob the muffin. "You take care of this. I'll try to find Jupe. Maybe he's in the fraternity's meeting room, otherwise I wouldn't know where else to look." He shrugged his shoulders.

"You won't get in there anyway," Bob said.

"But at least I can get close enough if Jupe needs my help!" Pete said. "If you hear anything from him, call me!"

"Sure," Bob assured him and pressed redial on his phone to reach his course instructor.

"I've already asked a chemistry professor friend of mine," Mr Roalstad said. "He will do the analysis for us immediately." They arranged a meeting place.

"Er... yes?" Jupiter pretended not to recognize Mr Leatherpants.

"Well, don't pretend!" said the drug pedlar. "A little birdie told me that you and your friends are investigators! What a coincidence, after you tried to buy drugs from me..."

Goodness! The Three Investigators were busted! There were too many Rocky Beach students on campus. Mr Leatherpants must have heard about it from someone.

"That... must be a coincidence," Jupiter tried to save the situation and feverishly searched for an excuse. He was annoyed beyond measure that he had not thought of this possibility in advance. A stupid mistake! He should have expected it. But everything had happened so quickly.

Now he had to decide. Should he try to talk his way out of it? That couldn't possibly go well. If Mr Leatherpants raised the alarm, everyone in the room would help him and Jupiter

would not be able to escape. His mission as an undercover agent in the ranks of Alpha Lambda Chi had been truly short...

But maybe now, in the middle of the misery, he had an unexpected chance to pursue the master of ceremonies after all! If Jupiter was blown anyway, he at least wanted to use the opportunity and make the best of the disaster!

Quick as a flash, he sprinted off. There were too many people between him and the front door. But the way to the back door, which the master of ceremonies had used, was clear in front of him!

When Jupiter got there, he heard Gamma shouting: "Stop him!"

Hastily, the First Investigator glanced back over his shoulder. Mr Leatherpants was rushing towards him. The First Investigator yanked open the door, rushed through and slammed it behind him. That bought him a few seconds.

A narrow corridor lay before him. Doors branched off to the right and left. Jupe ran on—and saw that one of them was open. No one was in the corridor yet. He jumped into the room, closed the door and stopped with a racing heart.

Had his pursuers noticed his manoeuvre? Would the door be ripped open in a moment? And how could he continue to pursue the master of ceremonies?

Only now could he look around. He had ended up in a storage room. He could not just stand there. Sooner or later, his pursuers would come in to check.

Heavy footsteps sounded just outside the door. At least three people were shouting something in confusion. Jupiter did not hear them clearly. His throat tightened. This looked bad.

Only at that moment did he look out of the window. Of course, he was on the ground floor! Why hadn't he thought of it immediately? He had lost precious seconds! He crept over so as not to make any noise and looked out into the open.

A few small bushes grew under the window, behind them stretched a grassy area and a car park. He should be able to climb out and escape. Only one man was in the vicinity. Jupe saw him walking from the building towards a silver-grey Bentley in the car park.

The First Investigator froze. That had to be him! Jupiter was sure he had seen this man a few minutes ago. That had to be... the master of ceremonies! He was about the same height as the masked man, and had about the same walking posture. In addition, the man had with him a relatively large bag which could well contain the cloak.

That was the alleged Bernhard Egglesforth III—unmasked!

16. Who is Bernhard Egglesforth III?

Bob entered a chemistry lab on the university campus with his instructor. Mr Roalstad's acquaintance was waiting there. The professor, a man with gentle features, introduced himself as Mr Kersky and immediately began his tests. He literally took the muffin apart.

At first Bob watched with interest and asked questions, but Kersky proved taciturn and concentrated on his work so Bob decided to just wait and see. He tried to take the opportunity to talk to Mr Roalstad, but he rigorously blocked any attempt to talk about the Teumessian fox or his father's past.

The minutes passed slowly and sluggishly until Kersky finally turned to his visitors and unexpectedly proved to be surprisingly talkative. "I can only say two things about what you have brought me here. First, it's a muffin, with all the trimmings. Only one thing is missing—sugar... which brings us to the second thing—this thing is guaranteed to taste awful. But drugs? Absolutely not."

Bob thanked him and Mr Roalstad asked his colleague emphatically to keep their meeting strictly confidential. "No one needs to know that I'm doing this research in secret." He did not mention Bob, which was fine with him.

"What are you up to?" asked Kersky. "Are you working on a report?"

Roalstad grinned. "Doesn't a reporter always do that, whether he's teaching or not?"

"I don't know. All I know is that a chemist doesn't do experiments all the time, but quite likes to go home to lie on the couch and read a crime novel."

They said goodbye and Bob could now at least rule out suspicion. For whatever reason Samantha Shirona and some others from Pete's poetry class had behaved strangely—it wasn't because of the muffins. At least no one had distributed drugs in the class in this way.

The mysterious master of ceremonies had his back to Jupiter. The First Investigator stood frozen in his hiding place in the storeroom. He broke out in a sweat. The way out through the window remained blocked as long as Egglesforth could see him. Jupiter knotted the fingers of both hands together. Someone could be looking for him in that room at any time!

Suddenly, Egglesforth turned and hurried back towards the building. Now the First Investigator saw his face clearly. He might be about thirty years old, had brown hair and inconspicuous glasses—an appearance that was immediately forgotten.

The mystery of why Egglesforth went back was solved instantly. Jupiter watched Gamma run towards him, gesticulating wildly. So now Jupe was very certain that that was the mysterious master of ceremonies, and there was also no doubt that Gamma was telling him about Jupiter.

But wait! Who else was out there? The First Investigator could not believe his eyes. There came Pete! The Second Investigator walked towards the building calmly and naturally. Why shouldn't he? After all, he had no idea what was happening a few metres away from him.

Jupiter pulled out his mobile phone, and dialled Pete's number. Through the window he watched his friend answer.

"Hide," he whispered into the phone. "Come on, they mustn't see you!"

Pete reacted immediately, without asking any questions. He ducked, bent down behind a dense bush.

Jupiter's palms grew damp with excitement and continued whispering on the phone: "Egglesforth and Gamma are just a short distance from you at the car park."

"You know who—"

"Listen! I'm stuck. Did you bring our equipment?"

"Sure, I wanted to come to your rescue in case you were in trouble. I took the precaution of—"

"Good," interrupted the First Investigator. "Take the tracking device and attach it to the silver-grey Bentley parked in the row in front of the building on the far left."

"Would someone see me?"

"Just take precautions and do it! That is Egglesforth's car. We can't lose him, this chance may never come again! Hurry before he goes back!" Jupiter hung up. Even the whisper was too loud for him. He felt it must be heard all the way down the corridor.

He watched his friend creep up, skilfully taking advantage of the cover provided by the other vehicles. Pete ran the last bit towards the car. He fiddled with the number plate—a good place to hide the small tracking device.

At the same time, Juve saw that Gamma and Egglesforth parted ways. Gamma returned to the building as the mysterious leader of Alpha Lambda Chi was going back to his car—and Pete was still at the car! Egglesforth didn't see him yet, but it was only a matter of seconds. Jupiter thought feverishly about what he could do. The answer was obvious—nothing! He was stuck...

The Second Investigator did his work quickly. Ducked, he dashed for cover again. Perfect! Jupiter was relieved. Now Pete should be able to receive the signals of the transmitter with the receiver. If the master of ceremonies and his car were within a few kilometres, they could track him at any time.

Egglesforth was getting closer. Jupiter took the opportunity to snap a few photos of him using his mobile phone. They were indistinctly taken through the smudged window but it was better than nothing.

The master of ceremonies got into the Bentley and drove off. Jupiter waited, inwardly tense as a bowstring, until the coast was finally clear. The car rolled off. This was the opportunity!

Jupiter opened the window and squeezed through. Roughly, he landed in the bushes. Branches broke under him and stabbed him in the legs. He paid no attention, but ran. Pete, with the receiver in his hand, waved at him. "Now what?"

Jupiter shook leaves and twigs from his trousers. "What? After him, of course!" He was glad of every metre he put between himself and the members of Alpha Lambda Chi.

How was this all going to go on? He thought with dread about the next few days. If they didn't manage to get Egglesforth arrested and report the fraternity to the police, Jupiter shouldn't be showing his face in Ruxton again.

They ran to Pete's car, which was still parked in front of the dormitory. The Second Investigator waited for Jupiter, who arrived breathing heavily after him, started up and rolled away. Jupiter kept a close eye on the receiver and guided his friend first down from the university grounds and then after their adversary.

The alleged Bernhard Egglesforth III drove slowly through the city towards the east. He obviously had no idea that someone was following him.

With all the unanswered questions, one came to the fore. Bernhard Egglesforth III may have headed Alpha Lambda Chi but did that automatically mean he was actually behind all

the criminal activities in Ruxton?

And was there a connection with all the other strange incidents? ... With the birds that remained stationary in the air? ... With the students who behaved as if under hypnosis? ... With the indefinable animal howls? ... With the Teumessian fox and the events in the past?

17. An Explosion

During the drive, Jupiter spoke to Bob on the phone.

“So now I have to stand around and wait while you chase Egglesforth?” Bob asked, annoyed.

“That can’t be helped now,” Jupiter clarified. “At the destination, we’ll tell you where we are. You send the police to us if we don’t report back within an hour.”

“How about right now?” Pete suggested.

“We need proof first! What are you going to accuse Egglesforth of? That he has a cloak in his boot and heads a perfectly legal fraternity?”

Ten minutes later, Bernhard Egglesforth parked in front of a detached house in a quiet residential area. Pete did not want to attract any attention, so he drove by without stopping or even slowing down. Nevertheless, the two investigators saw a shed in the garden. Eventually, Pete turned into the next junction and parked there.

Jupiter had noted the address of the house where Bernhard Egglesforth had gone to and gave it to Bob.

“One hour,” Bob said. “If I don’t hear anything by then, I’ll inform the police.”

Shortly afterwards, Jupiter and Pete walked back to the house in front of which the silver-grey Bentley was parked. Jupiter walked a distance behind Pete so as to be less conspicuous. Hopefully Egglesforth would not recognize the Second Investigator if he happened to see him through the window. A few metres further on, the two friends met again.

“I took a look at the name plate on the mailbox,” Pete said. “Our friend’s real name doesn’t sound as great as his cover identity.”

“And that would be?”

“Mortimer Walker—if he owns the house, which we don’t know for sure.”

Jupiter and Pete scurried along the narrow driveway close to the wall of the house until they reached the front of the shed. Its walls consisted of weathered wood all around, the windows were covered with dirt. Between the shed and the house was a small verandah and an overgrown garden. The weeds were knee-high. There was also a trailer that looked as if it had been rusting there unused for ages.

Jupiter and Pete heard a door creak open. It was coming from the house! The boys looked around quickly. The First Investigator wanted to run back down the driveway, but his friend grabbed him and pulled him into the garden. Together they hurried up to the old trailer and took cover behind it.

Two men came down the verandah and some steep, well-worn wooden steps into the garden. They were Egglesforth and an older man with a half bald head. A full white beard covered his cheeks and chin, and his eyebrows were bushy. The two resembled each other so much that they had to be father and son. One of them should be Mortimer Walker.

The older man sat down on a bench at the edge of the garden, picked up a book and began to read. He sat in such a way that he did not look into the garden, but onto the verandah. Egglesforth walked to the shed, pulled a key out of his pocket and unlocked it.

From their hiding place, the two friends could see everything perfectly. The master of ceremonies of Alpha Lambda Chi entered the shed. He soon returned, went to his father, spoke to him and went back into the house.

Pete signalled to Jupiter that he intended to take a look in the shed. "Egglesforth didn't lock it," he murmured and hurried off immediately.

Hopefully, like many older people, the father could no longer hear so well and therefore did not hear Pete's footsteps! Mr Walker senior read on unmoved.

The Second Investigator scurried into the shed. Jupiter was burning with curiosity, but he should not be leaving his hiding place.

Finally Pete returned. Visibly relieved, the Second Investigator slumped down behind the trailer.

"Bingo," he whispered, barely audible. "I went up a ladder to some kind of a platform for hay storage. There's a lot of drugs, jewellery, mobile phones and other stolen items there—what you can only imagine!"

In order not to sit idly by any longer, Jupiter quickly typed a text message to Bob. In it, he informed Bob and asked him to alert the police immediately and not wait for the one-hour deadline.

Walker alias Egglesforth came out of the house, put a can of beer down next to his father and went into the shed again. When he came back out, he locked up. He sat down with his father and opened the beer, sat back and drank. They were silent... just like the two investigators. It was so quiet that they didn't even dare to whisper.

Hopefully the Walkers would disappear soon. Slowly, all Jupiter's bones ached from crouching on the ground behind the trailer. But father and son did not do him this favour. The intruders waited for a sheer eternity... for exactly nineteen minutes.

Then the doorbell rang. Egglesforth went into the house and returned shortly afterwards with two police officers—a man and a woman. He was probably already telling them some tall tale, but the two investigators were ready to spoil his soup.

The junior and senior Walker were astonished when their secret observers emerged from hiding.

"What are you doing here?" Egglesforth snapped.

Jupiter ignored the question, addressing the police officers instead. "Thank you for coming so quickly."

"So you really are here," the policewoman said. "Your friend told us a wild story."

"Every word is true," Pete assured her. "Just take a look in the shed, I'll show you the stolen items and the drug stash!"

"What are these boys talking about?" the elder Mr Walker asked, looking at his son. "John, what is the meaning of this?"

John Walker that is. Whoever came up with the crazy name of 'Bernhard Egglesforth III'?

The younger Walker did not answer, but threw himself around and wanted to flee. Pete dashed after him and before the master of ceremonies reached the passage to the driveway, the Second Investigator jumped on him and brought him down.

They hit the ground. Egglesforth punched Pete in the chest. The Second Investigator was not deterred and clasped his hands around his opponent's arms, preventing him from getting up. Not a second later, the police officers pulled the criminal away from him.

Pete stood up. Breathing was visibly difficult for him, but when the policewoman asked if he was injured, he only waved and pointed to the shed. "Unlock it, Egglesforth! I'm sure the police are burning to know what you're hiding there."

The policeman handcuffed John Walker before they entered the shed. Walker's father slowly approached. He walked unsteadily, holding his hip with each step, and seemed unable to grasp what was happening in front of his eyes.

Shortly afterwards, Pete climbed the ladder again to show the police officers the stash of presumably stolen items.

"A strange hiding place," Pete said. "Just a wooden shed? It doesn't seem very safe to me."

"It has worked for over ten years," the leader of Alpha Lambda Chi explained in a muffled voice. "Why would anyone look there? No one has found me out!"

"That was before The Three Investigators got on your trail," Pete said with satisfaction.

The criminal's father limped back to the bench and dropped onto it. For him, the world seemed to have ended. "John," he kept whispering, stunned. "What have you done?"

The policemen questioned him and it came out that he had remained completely unaware all these years. Because of his poor physical condition, he had not been able to climb the ladder and discover the items. He claimed he had not entered the shed for ages.

Jupiter felt sorry for the old man who had been so bitterly disappointed with his son.

"We'll take care of Alpha Lambda Chi," the policewoman promised. "We'll take a close look at everyone and find out who's been involved in the crimes and who's just a harmless member of the fraternity. It's going to be a major operation at Ruxton... Who would have thought? You guys have helped us a lot. Quite an amazing achievement!"

Finally Jupiter and Pete got around to calling Bob and informing him of the latest twist. They laughed with relief on the phone, but all of a sudden the First Investigator felt guilty. He was in for an unpleasant conversation.

After ten o'clock in the evening, they were finally all sitting together in the kitchenette. A more than amazing day lay behind them—and a great success. It felt to The Three Investigators as if they had been in Ruxton for at least a week, but it was actually only two days.

"I only did it to infiltrate Alpha Lambda Chi," Jupiter said to Taylor-Jackson, who was sitting sullenly across the table from them. "I'm sorry about the break-in to your room. The police have recovered the stolen items. Older things have long since been sold, but your camera..."

"Forget it." Their housemate's voice sounded low and occupied. The mushroom tea in front of him, which he had not touched so far, didn't help either. "I wanted to ambush you just as much. But unlike you, all I cared about was becoming a member. If anyone needs to apologize, it's probably me."

Jupiter grinned. "Forget it," he repeated TJ's words.

He nodded. "Now that that's cleared up—a few other things are not clear to me at all. So Alpha Lambda Chi was a crime ring?"

"At least from the leader. John Walker alias Egglesforth sat like a spider in a web and enticed several members into theft and drug peddling. All this was done under the cover of the fraternity. All the members stuck together and remained secretive to the outside world, even those who had nothing to do with the crimes. It was an almost perfect cover, just like the myth Walker built around himself as a phantom master of ceremonies."

"The police will take care of it from now on," Pete said with relief. "For us, this chapter is closed."

A ringing sounded from Jupiter's room.

“Your mobile phone,” Taylor-Jackson said... except that it was not Jupiter’s ringtone. He had never heard this sequence of tones before. What had TJ just said? ‘Your mobile phone’?

No, that wasn’t true. It was the mobile phone—the strange, wafer-thin futuristic device that the First Investigator had found outside Lemuel Garvine’s house!

Jupiter jumped up and ran into his room. He tore open his suitcase, reached into the secret compartment, grabbed the mobile phone and unrolled it. The melody continued to play. The display no longer showed the wandering dots of light, but a symbol—a circle cut in half. Jupiter tapped on it.

“Yeah, it’s me... Just heard it on the police radio,” murmured a voice Jupiter did not recognize. The First Investigator held the device to his ear. “So the ‘mangy fox wannabe’ got it. It was a miracle that this screwed-up kid lasted so long anyway.”

“Absolutely,” agreed the First Investigator spontaneously. He had to experiment. “A real miracle!”

“But the schedule remains the same, doesn’t it?”

Thoughts were tumbling around in Jupiter’s head. He had no idea what the caller was talking about. “Uh, yes, everything remains as discussed.”

“Wait a minute!” The voice now sounded sharp and suspicious. “Who are you?”

Jupiter grimaced. The caller had seen through him.

“How did you get this phone?”

Apparently, the caller did not wait for an answer. The First Investigator heard a loud clack and an alarm tone shrilled from the mobile phone.

Jupiter stared at the display. A countdown was running there.

9... 8...

The mobile phone heated up.

7... 6...

Jupiter thought feverishly about what he should do.

5... 4...

The alarm became shriller.

3...

That was the last number Jupiter saw. He flung the mobile phone away, into the far corner of the room.

The noise of a small explosion thundered, sparks flew, the shreds of the device whirled through the room!

18. The Shadow Casts Further

Jupiter cried out. Smoke rose and small shreds of the futuristic mobile phone clattered against his legs. A jet of flame twitched up and immediately subsided.

Pete rushed into the room, followed by Bob. TJ stood outside the door in the hallway, pale in the face. The First Investigator dropped onto the bed with weak knees. If he had still been holding the mobile phone to his ear when it had exploded... He felt sick at the thought. Apparently, the unknown caller had triggered a self-destruction mechanism.

Everyone talked in confusion until Jupiter explained what had happened. He left out the details—Taylor-Jackson was not supposed to hear them. At least their housemate understood and discreetly retreated to his room. Only then did the First Investigator report everything in detail. He tried to repeat verbatim what he had been told through the mobile phone.

“Fellas,” said Bob, “we have only scratched the surface of the real secret of Ruxton.”

“I’m absolutely sure of that.” Jupiter thought about the stranger’s words. “He called Egglesforth a ‘mangy fox wannabe’—because he couldn’t have meant anyone else. He was the mangy fox who supposedly masqueraded as the Teumessian fox. By this he meant the wooden mask worn by the master of ceremonies in his performances.”

“That doesn’t quite fit,” Bob said. “You said he called Egglesforth something else too—namely, as a ‘screwed-up kid’!”

“Isn’t it the same thing?” Pete wondered.

“Not at all,” Jupiter admitted. “Egglesforth alias John Walker was only the pupil... the ‘fox wannabe’... and the real fox must be—” He narrowed his eyes. “Of course! Why didn’t I notice that right away?”

“What?” Pete asked.

“Didn’t you notice? Old Mr Mortimer Walker! You might well call John Walker his pupil—”

“John Walker’s... father?” asked Bob, puzzled.

“Exactly! The father! He’s the fox! He’s the real leader of the crime ring!”

“How did you come up with that?” Bob wondered.

“Pete, remember? Mortimer Walker said he never knew anything about his son’s activities because he could never have discovered the hiding place. In his frail condition, he said he couldn’t possibly climb the ladder.”

“He was limping badly,” said Pete. “That was clearly visible.”

“Not so! He fooled us! At the very beginning, when he didn’t realize that he was being observed, we were already crouching behind the trailer. And that’s also when the father walked across the verandah completely normally and descended the steep steps to the garden!” Jupiter grabbed his mobile phone—this time his own. He was fed up with any futuristic devices.

He called the police and informed them of his suspicions. They promised to go to Mr Walker’s place immediately.

An hour later, the police called back and the First Investigator was right. They had caught old Mr Walker packing his things to leave—never to be seen again.

The Three Investigators did not go to bed until well after midnight.

No one fell asleep quickly. Their thoughts went on a merry-go-round. Far too many questions remained unanswered, and too many mysteries unsolved. Ruxton still held more than one secret.

Jupiter in particular wondered who the caller on the strange mobile phone had been and how such a device could exist at all. When he finally fell asleep, he dreamt of birds that remained stationary in the sky and of poison dart frogs that stared at him with wide eyes.

Bob, on the other hand, was still lying awake. He thought of his father, and of the Teumessian fox which could never be caught.

The next morning, Pete was dead tired to get to his poetry class, even though there were a lot of things he would have preferred to do. Sleeping, for example, was at the top of his list.

He was a little late and quietly took his seat next to Samantha, who beamed at him.

Just then, the student named Corvy recited her latest work. And although the Second Investigator was not in the mood to hear a poem now, the words hit him like a blow:

*The shadow world is where the mystery lies;
What happens there, is beyond our eyes;
Ghostly figures wandering all night long;
Listening to the fox sing its eternal song.*

*To be continued in
Part II: Venomous Attack.*